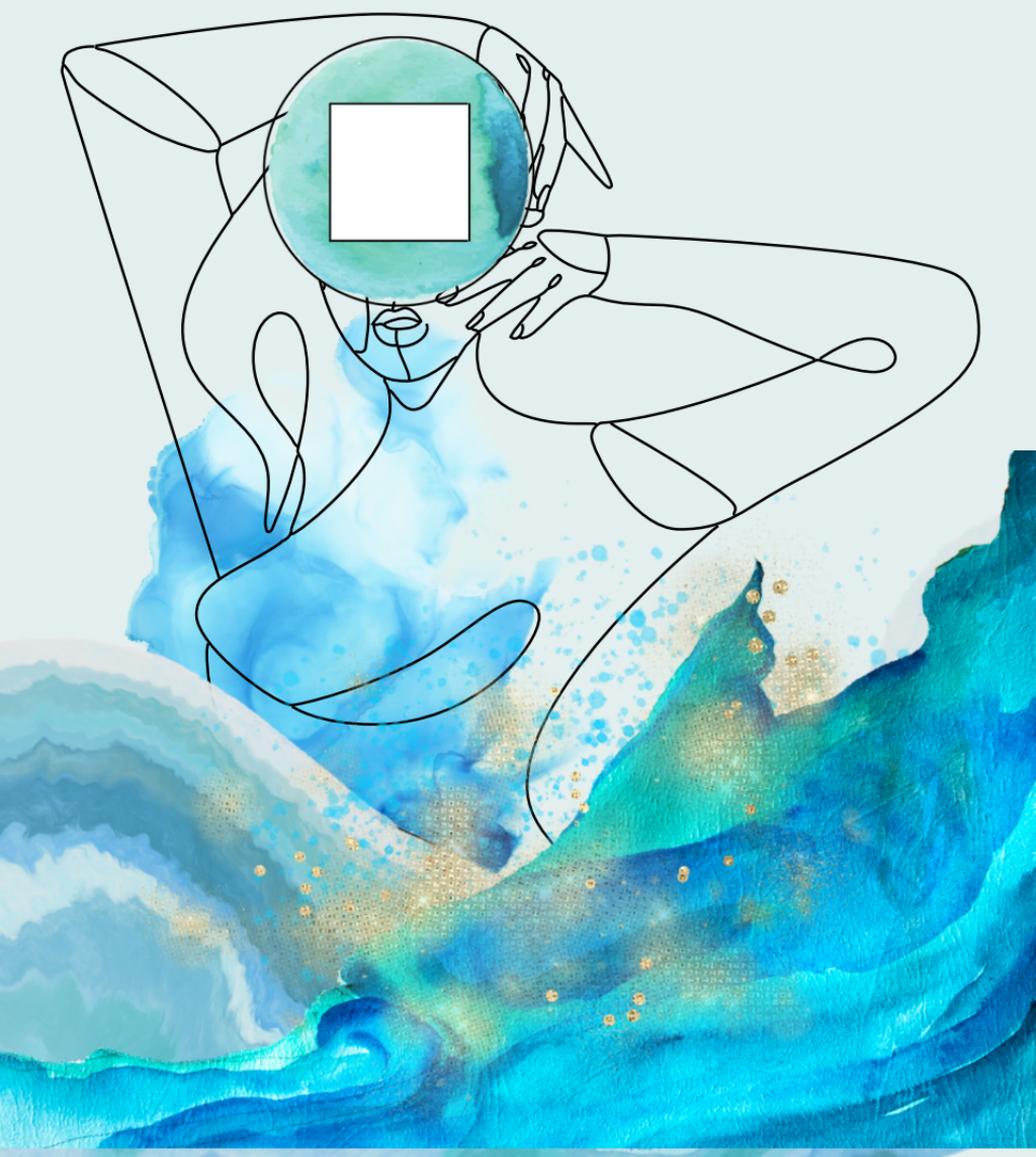
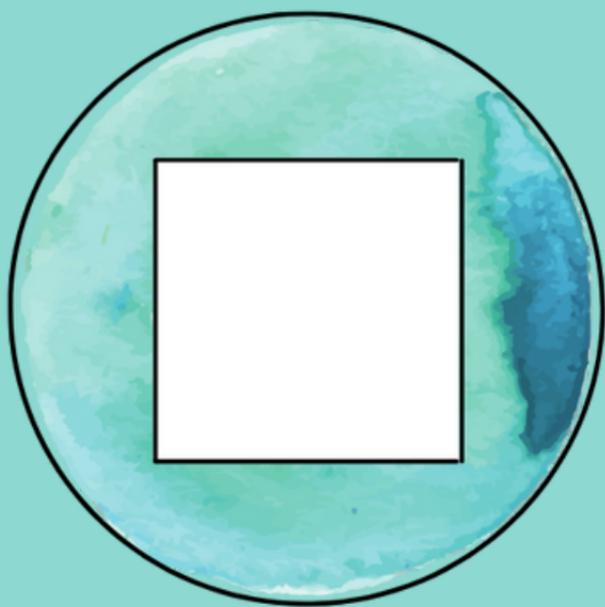


TABULA RASA REVIEW

ISSUE ONE





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in order of appearance

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Paul Ilechko
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Jade Hidle

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AUTHOR BIOS

GLEN ARMSTRONG

Glen Armstrong (he/him) holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and edits a poetry journal called *Cruel Garters*. He has three current books of poems: *Invisible Histories*, *The New Vaudeville*, and *Midsummer*. His work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Conduit*, and *The Cream City Review*.

BECKY BEI

Becky is a writer from Asia, where she is studying in secondary school.

DIVISHA CHAUDHRY

Divisha Chaudhry is an English (research) undergraduate based in India. Her writings have been published by *The Phosphene*, *The Blahcksheep*, *The Horizon Magazine*, *Sunday Mornings at the River*, *Sweetycat Press*, and *Livewire.in*, among others. She is an advocate for intersectional environmentalism and a lover of animals.

OLIVIA "LIV" FARRAR

Olivia 'Liv' Farrar writes in hopes that the unarticulated can take a vacation from her brain. She's been published in several literary magazines, including *Foothills Magazine*. When she's not writing or editing, she's usually hammocking and fishing. Check out her website at livfwrites.journoportfolio.com.



EMMA GELLER

Emma Geller is a poet, singer, and actress from Boston, MA. She's known for her spooky aesthetic & commitment to rebelliousness. Her poetry has been featured in various publications, including *Quillkeeper's Press*, *Honeyfire Literary Magazine*, and *Calliope's Eyelash*.

ILYSSA GOLDSMITH

Ilyssa Goldsmith graduated from Arizona State University with a Bachelor's in Communication. She enjoys writing poetry, which sounds out the space where the muse, myth, and female desire reside. Ilyssa is passionate about exploring the nature of the repressed female psyche within her poetry. She believes language can be utilized as a tool for discovery, healing, and recovery. Ilyssa keeps a dog-eared copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* close to her bed and is known to recite her favorite lines to anyone who will listen on a daily basis. *Goodbye (Hello)* is her first poetry collection.

JADE HIDLE

Jade Hidle (she/her/hers) is the proud Vietnamese-Irish-Norwegian daughter of a refugee. She is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. Her travel memoir, "The Return to Viet Nam", was published by *Transcurrent Press* in 2016, and her work has also been featured in *Michigan Quarterly Review: Mixtape*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Columbia Journal*, and the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network's diacritics.org. You can follow her work at www.jadehidle.com or on Instagram [@jadethidle](https://www.instagram.com/jadethidle).

PAUL ILECHKO

Poet and songwriter Paul Ilechko lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ. He is the author of several chapbooks. His work has appeared in a variety of journals, including *The Night Heron Barks*, *Feral Journal*, *K'in*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, and *Book of Matches*. His first album, "Meeting Points", was released in 2021.

EDWARD LEE

Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, nonfiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen*, and *Smiths Knoll*. He is currently working on two photography collections: "Lying Down With The Dead" and "There Is A Beauty In Broken Things". He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Orson Carroll, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy.

KATE MACALISTER

Writer and feminist-social-justice-witch Kate MacAlister has been writing poetry for over a decade. Her imaginative works have been published in journals and anthologies all over the world. Her poems are stories of human connection and the dreams of revolution.

BRICE MAIURRO

Brice Maiurro is a poet and storyteller from Denver, Colorado. He is the editor-in-chief of *South Broadway Press* and the co-founder of *Punketry*, a monthly series out of *Mutiny Information Cafe*. He has authored two collections of poetry, *Hero Victim Villain* and *Stupid Flowers*. You can find more about him at www.maiurro.co.

ISABELLA J MANSFIELD

Isabella J Mansfield (she/her) writes about anxiety, body image, both generally and as a woman with a disability, intimacy, and the human condition. Mansfield has performed at The Oberon Theatre, Cambridge, MA, Nambucca London, U.K., and at various readings and open mics across the US. In 2017, she was a Brittany Noakes Award semi-finalist, a two-time Pushcart nominee, she won the inaugural 2018 Mark Ritzenhein Emerging Author Award, and *Finishing Line Press* published her chapbook, *The Hollows of Bone*, in 2019. She lives in Howell, MI with her family.

NICOLE M METTS

Nicole M Metts is currently an MFA student at Chatham University and a grade schoolteacher. She is the founder of Central Texas Writers Society. Her poems have appeared in *A&M Central's The Lookout*, *InSpirity-Art of Peace*, *Gingerbread House*, *Di-verse-city*, and many others. She spends her free moments exploring the natural world with her notebook, Nikon, and her dog Cookie.

MICHELLE MEYER

Michelle Meyer (michellemeyerwrites.com) is the author of the chapbook, *10 Pieces of Truth*, and *The Book of She*, a full-length collection of character vignettes devoted to women. Her poems have appeared in *Dust & Fire*, *My Minnesota Woods*, *The Talking Stick*, *Welter Online*, and *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, among others. In addition, Michelle is a house-sitter, hiker, and tireless gardener.

GLENN MORI

Glenn Mori has a master's degree in music composition, works as a CPA, has used online poker winnings to pay for vacations, and—pre-pandemic, played in local jazz groups but he spends most of his free time editing his own fictions. He is an Editorial Assistant for *Every Day Fiction* and most recently has been audio-published by *Stories Less Spoken*.

AIMEE NICOLE

Aimee Nicole is a chronically ill, queer poet currently residing in Rhode Island. She holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Roger Williams University and has been published by various lit mags. Her first collection, *Daily Worship*, is forthcoming from *Laughing Ronin Press*, January 2022. Feel free to follow her on Instagram [@aimeenicole525](#) for awkward selfies and pictures of her cat.

PARIDHI PODDAR

Paridhi Poddar, hailing from Kolkata, India, believes that words begin to form deltas here, carefully silting into poetry, and sometimes she manages to collect a verse or two. Her work has previously appeared in *The Verse of Silence*, *Blue Things*, *Gypsophila Magazine*, and is upcoming in the *Chasing Shadows Magazine*. She was also published along with the shortlisted 25 poets in their *Poetry in Pamphlets Collection* contest.

JULES V SANTIN

Jules V. Santin is a Pushcart Prize-nominated author who focuses on creative nonfiction. She lives in the Los Angeles area, but travels all over the world collecting stories. Her work is featured or forthcoming in *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Riggwelter*, and numerous anthologies.

KACI SKILES LAWS

Kaci Skiles Laws is a closet cat-lady and creative writer who reads and writes voraciously in the quiet moments between motherhood and managing Crohn's Disease. She grew up on a small farm in a Texas town alongside many furry friends, two sisters, and a brother. She has known tragic loss too well, and her writing, which is often dark and honest, is a reflection of the shadows lurking in her psyche. Her work can be viewed at kaciskileslawswriter.wordpress.com.

STEPHANIE STEPHAN

At this very moment, Stephanie Stephan is preparing to face the monster that lives in her chimney. There is a chance it might not go well. In such an event, she would like you know that her fiction has been nominated for Best of the Net and has appeared in *Second Chance Lit*, *Breadcrumbs*, and *Fright Girl Summer*. To find out if she survives, you can follow her on Instagram [@stephanie.stephan.writes](https://www.instagram.com/stephanie.stephan.writes) or visit her at stephanie-stephan.com.

ELIZABETH STONE

Elizabeth Stone graduated with a degree in Creative Writing and works as a professional writer in Cincinnati, Ohio. When she's not writing, she enjoys drinking tea, exploring the city, and spending time with her two cats.

PASQUALE TROZZOLO

Pasquale Trozzolo is a retired madman from Kansas. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Sunspot Literary Journal*, *The Pangolin Review*, *What Rough Beast*, *34th Parallel*, *From Whispers to Roars*, *The Dewdrop*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and *Tiny Seed Journal*. *The Poetry Box* published his debut chapbook *Before the Distance* in December 2020. Still no tattoo—or MFA, he continues to complicate his life by living out as many retirement clichés as possible.

PALMINA VILONE

Palmina Vilone is an Italian-Australian-born young writer completing a Bachelor's of Creative Writing at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. When she isn't creating new stories and worlds, she enjoys spending time with her many pets. "Born Again" is her first published piece.

MELODY WANG

Melody Wang (she/her) is a poet and writer who currently resides in sunny Southern California with her dear husband and wishes it were autumn all year 'round. She obtained her MSW at the University of Southern California. She is a reader for *Sledgehammer Lit*, and her poems are published or forthcoming in various journals and anthologies including *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Trouvaille Review*, *West Trestle Review*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *The Wild Word*, *One Art Poetry Journal*, and *Hobart After Dark*. She enjoys reading, tinkering on the piano, hiking, baking, and playing with her dogs. Her debut chapbook, *Night-blooming Cereus*, is coming out in December 2021 with *Alien Buddha Press*.

LISA WATTS

Growing up in a small town located in Ontario, Lisa, who goes by l.w. through her poetry, found comfort in her writings at a young age. Writing quickly became her escape from reality, as it was the only form of expression that she stumbled upon, and she still uses it as an escape to this day. Only now, she also hopes to be that escape for someone else, if possible.



GAGE MICHAEL WHEATLEY

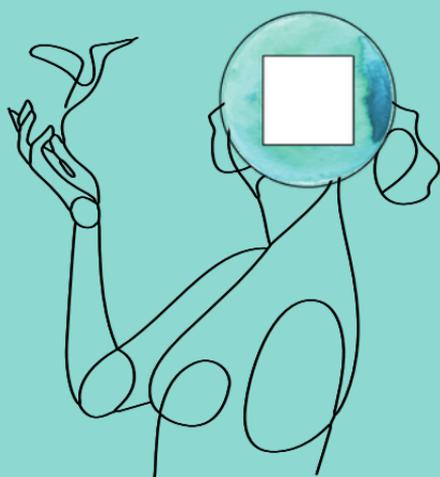
Gage Michael Wheatley is the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Labyrinth Anthologies*. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Classics: Archeology and Ancient History, with a minor in Art History. Gage loves to weave mythology, art and history into his poems that often reflect deeply personal aspects of his body and/or psyche. When bored, Gage has a tendency to move furniture around his apartment, cut or dye his hair, or get a new tattoo--his partner is never too happy with any of those choices.

JORDAN WILSON

Jordan Wilson (they/them/theirs) is a 24-year-old artist and writer based in Sacramento, California. Jordan is Afro-Latinx, non-binary, queer, trans, and chronically-ill/disabled. These identities do not exist in isolation nor are they inherently radical: rather, they form their experience of the world. They are passionate about art and theater that is accessible, engaging, and empowers marginalized folks like themselves. Because of how their identities intersect with different communities, discussions within them inform the work they do, whether it be physical art, writing, directing, or public speaking.

CHRISTOPHER WOODS

Christopher Woods is a writer and photographer who lives in Chappell Hill, Texas. He has published a novel, *The Dream Patch*, a prose collection, *Under a Riverbed Sky*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *Heart Speak*. His photographs can be seen in his gallery, christopherwoods.zenfolio.com. His photography prompt book for writers, *From Vision to Text*, is forthcoming from *Propertius Press*. His novella, *Hearts in the Dark*, was recently published by *Running Wild Press*. His poetry chapbook, *What Comes, What Goes*, was published by *Kelsay Books*. He has received residencies from The Ucross Foundation and the Edward Albee Foundation.



POETRY

POETICA

Melody Wang

AGAIN, I WONDER

Do memories exist from a time
when all you knew was the warm
fluid-filled sac you were immersed in?

Suspended and trapped, buoyant,
were you oblivious to the planetary spin
or anything else beyond this lucid world?

Your ears buzzed with the constant
drone of a steady pulse (yours/mine)
and yet — somewhere

in the distance, a single tune: strange,
sweet melody floats down upon
your tiny being as tendrils

of neurons root themselves
into your subconscious only to be
reignited by all that held you



Nicole Metts

MATERNAL FIRE

previously published by Waco Word Fest, 2020

To my dear daughter Victoria,

I cannot give you an answer
for Eve or her apple, nor can I
unravel roles without a discomfort.
I can tell you, the cord
linking between us remains, and

maturing feels like a butterfly in reverse.
But there can be heaven in moments
of attribute, a softness, to sing
the endearment of matriarch.
History has led us into fire.

There is blood
in our ancestry, yes, but fire
still rises on the horizon.
A blaze more collective than we.
As kindness is not weakness,

and roots of mother trees
have been known to lift foundations.
I can tell you... the beginning
is never like the end at all.



Jordan Wilson

BITE-SIZED CATAclysm

I am struggling to understand things bigger than myself
So, I dig my toes in the dry, hot sand
Until I find the cool, damp earth just underneath it
And I lay with the rest of my body on a blanket
Watching both an ant crawl at the edge and
the scrawny branches sway in the heat
Hot enough that it burns your nostrils

I overhear a walking couple saying that
The overbearing pollen compliments the burning of the heat

See, I know something they don't
I know that it's because male trees don't bear fruit
And they can only bear pollen
And in an attempt to keep the look of clean streets
They were overly planted decades before I was even thought of
But without fruit, the pollen simply wanders
Not knowing the wave of damage
Simply caused by their wanting

And now you know too
I admire them in that way
Obnoxious and overly present

I don't interrupt their wandering conversation
I don't imagine it would add anything to it
I would only be able to recommend
A slightly stronger medicine

i do not know how to make the world small again
so I stay sitting under this tree
continuing to watch the scrawny branch
fight the wind

I try to figure out how fast I would need to move
if the tree branch broke

Maybe it would be good to forget some things again
To not know cataclysms
Or how worlds begin and end
Or how it feels to know when your own world has collapsed

What does a bite-sized cataclysm even look like?
How do you begin to imagine it?
A destructive petit fours?
A deep-fried hand pie of revelation?
A pudding cup-sized atomic bomb
That you take in a little baggy for lunch
Not knowing that you're holding a whole little world
in your small sticky hands



Glen Armstrong

ANTHROPOMORPHIC

Things that are people
make me crazy

sometimes.
People who are things

make me stop
to stroke my beard

as if I've failed at balancing
the whimsy

and fear that they've unloaded
into my arms

while I was trying to find the key
to my front door

in the dark.
The size of our furniture

reminds us that we're as big
as we ever were,

which isn't big enough.



Nicole Metts

STILL A HEARTBEAT

previously published by The Poetry Society of Texas, 2021

When it is cold outside,
I think of the birds.

How they fluff their feathers,
the only armor against the

bitter slashes of wind. There
is a darkness in this white

and a strange silence that
moves this snow in ripples,

shapes those icicles sharp,
slanting left. It is easy

to understand how
the white blanket

can be mistaken for
a place to rest; the

steady slowing
heartbeat, a comfort.



Emma Geller

WANDERLUST

i walked out
into the desert,
not knowing what i
was looking for.
hitchedhiked for a while,
& slept in train cars,

reminded me of the past, in a comforting way.
warm tea, reading about how Kerouac was always
going somewhere else, soaking up poetry with his eyes
drinking mountain air, not needing anyone's approval.

i liked that,
it's the dream that put me
on the road, but after years i can't find
somewhere to call home,

it's not in others but in myself.
& that's hard to face with this artist soul,
burning up always for something else.

my hearts a map & i dream of its crossroads,
always knowing where to go, but not
where to stay,

black cats wandering,
forever astray.



Kate MacAlister

WOLF STREET

every corner
in this town
hums
with the perfume
of the sacred ground
wilderness
between us
enraptured
and withering
not unlike
the pages of all those
books unread
stacked right next to your dreams
a carefully crafted poison
seeps from the shelf
grows into my
second skin
what can I do
but walk out into the rain
to wash these nights away



at least the trees
bloom
untainted
by your touch
I left a charm in your top drawer
daylight sighs close to my ear
a hand still up in my hair
no talisman could shield you
from the weight
on your broad back
from crawling after
crumbs on
a perpendicular path
laid decades ago
your raw wounds
are sugar to my
hungered skin
know that
when
your shadows
hunt you
I will still honour
every part of you



Ilyssa Goldsmith

I AM WOMAN (NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU)

I am alone
in the bathtub
entangled in myself
and I don't need anyone
to fetishize me
or complete me
as if I am an object for consumption
my body
naked in
the female form

I am not here for procreation
or fondling
or sexual gratification
I am not here for the male gaze
or to be seen as a point of completion
on your path to enlightenment
I am not here to be sacrificed
to be lessened in your name
You will not eradicate or take something
from me if I am to be with you

My body
Naked
alone
in the bathtub
encompasses my vessel of words
my cultivation
my voice
my gaze
my sight
my becoming
and that has nothing to do with you

That has nothing to do with trophies
or sleek slimy magazine covers
That has nothing to do with losing weight
or gaining weight
That has nothing to do with shaking hips
(They don't lie).

For your gaze
For your gratification
Sexualization
Objectification

Woman comfortable in her body is a whore
Woman who is modest is a prude
Woman who is comfortable in her body
She is a platter for you
She is a snack or a meal
She is an object for consumption
Because when woman embraces her sexuality
she must have something to offer you
but I don't

I am entangled in my body
Naked
alone
in my bathtub
and that has absolutely nothing to do with
you.



KIMBERLY'S HANDS

previously published by The Blue Nib, #40, 2019

It's late.
There is always time
by the subway.

Kimberly dabs her thumb in concealer
to rid me of my dark marks;
I can't sleep anymore.

A man offers me a blue tab,
to wait for the ecstasy footswitch;
I decline,
the subway dashes, her hair reaches,

she continues to fill in the depressions
with porcelain; my face
eats a palette of rhinestones.

It's late. I'm turning thirty one;
there is supposed to be a pivot.
The street—a canvas. The subway—
where we leave suggestions of our youth.



Like a modern day Hansel and Gretel,
we slough off traces of glamour
toward home, for the curious raccoons,
until the city hag decides to char,
her cackles rest in cinder and ash.

Kimberly's fingertips keep pace;
we are statues chiseling out
our own cheekbones.

She concentrates, and it's better when
she doesn't speak or ask why—

why we start letting ourselves forgo love,
why we ever stop scratching
for connections,
why the glitter sticks only in places
we wish it wouldn't.



Nicole Metts

OIL AND LIGHT

previously published in "easing the edges", 2021

Inspired by a walk in a thunderstorm in New York City

I walked on a black mirror of moving water,
as the shimmering moon dropped her children,
inside the drapes of black ocean waves,
like stars, they branch and bleed into everything.

A woman runs with her purse on her head.
Neon ghosts float on the iridescent inky palette,
etched of sky, the silhouettes drip and bend,
on the stagnant wet concrete curling exhaust
and that hiss and honk of impatient cars.

Glossed umbrellas scurry and seem
to follow an elongated glow,
that dissipates behind them. They
watch and talk in inlets, indigo flickers
inside dark ocean that ripples and curves of light.

Warm in its white light and sweet roasting,
a simple hotdog stand, now a beacon,
with an aroma to overpower the roar, the rush--the rot
in the urban wet air. The attendant's cigarette
bounces as he speaks. People swallow warmth,
then continue, into the kaleidoscope,
of water, oil, and light on the asphalt.



Pasquale Trozzolo

MULTITASKING

previously published by Mono Fiction, 2021

Sounds like she's giving
dictation as we make love
while she talks carpool and
landscaping. At least she's
naked though covered in her to do-list—
and a bra. My lover is somewhere
buried in important things too hard to forget
even for the next 12 minutes? She's in a
hurry now, for all the wrong reasons. I want to
complain, but she's almost done—and I love her.



Liv Farrar

NO MORE PARTY BLUES

enshrined in the shadows cast by passing light,
I feel a kiss of immortality on the top of my head,
I don't know who gave it to me; it does not leave this place
for the rest of the night. Pretty women in prettier blouses
make sure I'm ok, and there's a playful shyness about the pit stains
that my floating ember movements leave behind.
the nerves accumulate at my lips meeting the backlit punch,
in the gut, I am more than butterflies & esophagus spasms;
I am more than holding back and joining the water in a bathtub
or letting the salt in my tears be diluted by a shower.
I relish the lock clicking out of its closed place;
the white walls shoving me out of their garden—
It must mean the colors & shades of "you don't belong here"
are gone, gone.
I am the bonfire that doesn't cease at the 12 AM strike,
even when there are firefighters and slurring of words and
all the leftover nerves cracking in the wood below my feet—
it's crushing in the most breath-of-fresh-air way.
and the music from the last room in the last house standing
greet me suddenly the next morning, with my mortality.



Emma Geller

MIDWEST AMERICA PART ONE

previously published by Goat's Milk Magazine, #11

your hand
on my thigh,
when we're driving,
doesn't feel like it used to.

we don't talk
at the gas station,
when we stop
for water & cigarettes.

we keep driving down
highways, curving
through states,
we don't stop

to take pictures.
we keep moving,
though there's
nowhere to go.



Emma Geller

MIDWEST AMERICA PART TWO

previously published by Goat's Milk Magazine, #11

next morning, they
found our bodies
by the lake.

we were turned away
from each other,
backs staring
at the shore.

you broke my heart
by the water. we ended
up, the same way
we started.

the final scene,
in the film of our life,
it wasn't heartbreak
but not a happy ending either.



Aimee Nicole

THE END

In my thoughts, we've already broken up.
Your absence multiplies like
infected cells spreading disease
wall to wall of skull,
weaving holes in the brain
to carefully carve memories.
Please just put my books in a box
so I can lift them to trunk without
mediocre conversation... you
had the chance to reach hand
around throat and save us both
but no, no we drowned right there
in the backyard with everyone watching.



Lisa Watts

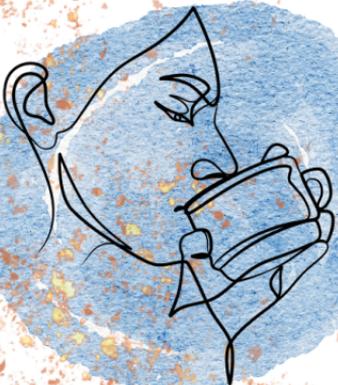
ODE TO MY DEPRESSION

you hate me for hating you,
"all in my head," disease.
how did you get here?
more so, why did you come?
when i am sad, you clap.
when i can't get out of bed, you laugh.
you cheer when i want to die,
and i have wanted to die
more times than i have wanted to live.
so let me thank you,
for all the teary eyed,
pillow punching,
suicide-note writing nights.
for the friendship breaking,
brain clanking,
grade failing days.
even more so, for the blue gown,
paper and plastic bracelet wearing,
hospital tea parties
that you invited me to.
they pump me with pills
because of you.
they call me, "attention seeking"
because of you.
but what they don't know
is i can't live
without you.
i don't know who i am
without you.
l.w.



GHOST GIRL

coffee shop blues / with rainy December clouds, her eyes /
Alaskan ice metallic glass like/ frozen ponds we skated on/ _____
as kids, but she won't let me talk/ about growing up anymore, coffee/creme she pours into
/a coffee cup; she asks if i want sugar/ but i can't look her in the eye _____ yet, until
i tell her what i couldn't ask her/before she died/ so i breathe in _____ the ghost
of her, praying/ that this grey day/ won't be the death of us/ _____ even dirt
and six feet of earth can't/separate what we have here if you know _____ what i mean,
"i think i do" her voice a rasp/a whisper of dove wings and white lace i know this
is why i gave you that note on new year's eve/ to come meet me
at this same spot/ you ordered a chocolate croissant with whip-
_____ ped creme/ it was the cutest thing i'd ever seen _____
_____ & every day since your funeral/ i've come _____
_____ here trying to find you and after i ordered _____
_____ your favorite, i saw you staring at me from _____
_____ across the room. you were wearing blue _____



Michelle Meyer

BANANAS

I went to the store to buy bananas because
I always buy bananas and it felt like
a normal thing to do.

When it was my turn to pay, I set the
cheery yellow bunch—each fruit shaped like a smile
on to the conveyor belt and the clerk said

Hello, how are you today?

I wanted to say,
My mother just died.

I wanted to say,
*I don't even know if I can eat these bananas
or anything else
ever again.*

I wanted to say,
*This is a grocery store not a therapy session,
why must you ask me such an impossible question?*

I said,
I think I'm going bananas

which made the clerk look up at me
and laugh.



Michelle Meyer

HOSPITAL GOSSIP

Poor woman sat in a hospital bed
alone
after dialysis
in front of food she couldn't eat
without the company of a lover or a friend or
her only child—

poor thing.

Without
her only child, the daughter
she was so proud of, so grateful,
thankful to have,
who was a thousand miles away, who
came late to the world—late
to her bedside—late
to love, to forgiveness, to maturity—late
to the ICU because that child
was out running again.

She was always running, that girl, always running
to some other place
and by the time she turned around to run back to
this place—that woman—her mother
was gone—

poor thing.



STRANGE FRUIT

Do we mourn over the dead
or hoard their possessions like alchemical vultures —

never satisfied with the life
(always seeking the product to save her)
I've been thinking about how the masses raided
Billie Holiday's house (after her death)
After her trial (against the United States)
As if to say you do not belong here
Ants swarming the cricket's body
Hers malnourished and drug-abused
prostituted and left in disuse
How she was criminalized for her body and her color
How she bled (and passed out on the stage)
after pressing her favorite flower to her head
(with no suspect as needle)

There was no case for the woman
who grew up in the projects
who became victim to a song about strange fruit
(and swollen bodies hanging from the root)
whose records were burned in a careless fire by careless men
who I still do not know to this day

Billie

Billie Holiday

I listen to your voice

in this liminal age

and I can't see you

I can't see you

over your drug abuse

and your melancholy (soul use)

But I believe

You

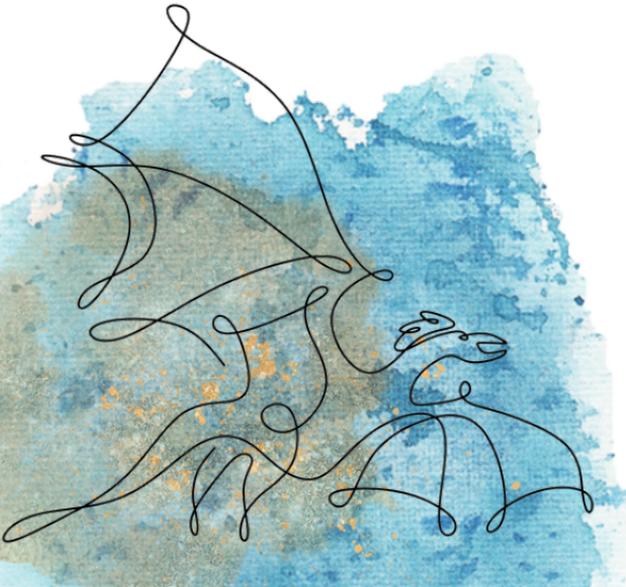
I believe you.



Becky Bei

TEETH

The family at the reunion dinner is a rebrand of bluetooth
White tooth maybe, but it's rotting in a drawer,
not telling stories at the river
About straits shaped like dragon teeth:
long ya men, dragon-toothed gate
It can only exchange compliments with unstable connection
and antiquated updates,
Bogged down with most code written in the wrong language,
language that the programmer sung forgotten songs in
Because compliments are the most exciting stories they can tell,
swayed by arguments between the matriarchs,
debt between the patriarchs
They left the table after the six-hundred-dollar urn floated up again,
arranged with the other nameless dead
in neat rows and columns and floors
On the floor the children fiddle with cartoons, ignore
the sudden document dispatches,
misdirected to unsuspecting doe-eyed infants



A BLUE WINDOW

Remember, summers at the beach;
Dad would take us to Port A?
We'd scavenge the shore for sand dollars
and find pieces
and whole parts of dead crabs;

you hooked one claw around your thumb,
ran screaming to your mom
like it was alive, and it had you.

I wish you were alive.

We dug a hole in the sand where the
water could crawl and fill it in.
I was mesmerized, sitting in the salty
sensation, the pull of the tide;
I didn't see the man-of-war
float across my legs. You ran away;

I ran crying with red skin.
Dad made me pee on my legs
to make the stinging stop.

Remember, I found a hermit crab
lost in a patch of seaweed
the same day?
Dad let me keep it because he felt bad;
I left it in a glass of tap water
on the nightstand.
We got back and our hotel room
smelled of gutted fish and rot.



It was free of its shell, dead, and bloated.

We were young all those years,
always removing sand
from places it didn't belong.

Each time Dad got a promotion
we got better rooms
and in those last five years, condos.

We'd be the first ones peeking
into a blue cabin's windows,
twisting at the knobs impatient
and giddy as seagulls
who have lifted Cheetos up from toddlers.

There were wars between us,
and petty debates
about sandwich spreads; you said
Miracle Whip was best,
and I licked Mayonnaise off a lid.

I secretly tasted your choices,
tried on your preference of punk rock,
stole the keys to Dad's truck;
I liked it all.

We were Tom and Huck, sometimes.

Remember, I punched you in the face
when I was four-and-a-half
and you were seven,
standing on a pillow in our room?
I wanted to make the bed,
and your brother taught you to be mean.



You cried and Dad stifled a laugh,
but your mom was raving mad.
There were so many fights,
bitter sweet things,
we were.

We were hurricanes and smog and song.

I can't remember the last time
I took a vacation,
but see how my life has become
an extended break.

I finished my finals at the university.
I swore to you I'd graduate,
but I never went back, and it never
made a difference.

I try to remember who I was
throughout the years,
but she's gone like you, trying
less to ruminate.

I grapple with PTSD and beaches
and know I'll have to find
something completely different
to love, a far off rocky shore
holding a lighthouse and ice for half
of the year. I don't want warm air.



I just want this rolling fog to replace
each wrinkle like it will,
each limp without me knowing;

I want to erase you the same way
the water takes writing in the sand
away with its push and pull,
the same way it dissolves sand castles
and crabs and never feels a thing.

I want a place that is a long stay
summer home, to stare
into an unfamiliar blue window.



BÖTTGERSTEINZEUG

Kaolin, alabaster,
China stone and quartz at 20%.
Fire at 1300° celsius.

My forms are not as pure
as that.

Sulfur and arsenic stained notebooks
contain abstract notions of grandeur.
Failed experiments.

I claim to know the secret to turning worthless ideas
into porcelain and gold. But with muddied hands?
Heavenly bodies are not made from red clay.

And yet I stoke the fire to remove the water from my eyes,
dreaming of translucent bodies in which
my name would ring in the annals of history;

escape the stone walls and iron bars which
are like home to me.

I see the recipes before me in the hands of the dead.
To take them and build on what came before me,
that is the tradition.
I'll pretend I knew the answer all along.

What else do you expect from an alchemist?



ECLIPSE

it has been a week, an entire week, since they announced that the world is ending fifty years from now. don't you remember? we listened to the news together, as you lay there. eyes looking like eclipses and the world would need safety glasses to look into them. that the moles on your body are blindspots on the sun, growing darker each passing day. they said that the jungles would go first, that the dampness of your wavy hair would burn with the forests. after that, the clouds beneath your eyes would become heavier, and it would rain like it has never before. bolts would pierce our hearts, thundering indifference upon the city skyline. that the kohl of the lashes would exhaust itself, and there would be no blinking. no repose from the flowing floods descending upon our heads in flashes like long lost memory. the apocalyptic movements of the planets would resemble your fists, hitting rock bottom till it hurts. that there would be no second planet, no escape from the arms of oblivion, collapsing into a fiery embrace. that the tectonic plates would collide like your collarbones melting into mine. and all of us would put on safety glasses, sit back and watch. that the sun would become the moon and the stars would become rocks like the dying flames of affection, and once again, a never-ending eclipse would set in, and in the darkness everything would become one.

the world is ending in fifty years from now,
but whenever I am with you, I tend to see it more clearly,
even with the safety glasses on.



I AM WAITING FOR THE WAR TO END

The war never left
Hiroo Inoda,
Japanese soldier
forever on an island.
In the autumn of the war
they dropped leaflets from planes
singing it's over, it's over,
but the war never left for him.
They gave him a war
and then he was the war,
and home never came for him.
I am waiting for the war to end.
Above my head
they drop the leaflets
but all around me
are victory songs
sang by dead singers.
We set fire to our jungle,
and all of our wilderness
that we abandoned there.
The war is our cave now,
our last meal every meal,
the war is our mother.
As softly as a tree
on an island on fire,
I am waiting for the war to end.

PATTERN RECOGNITION

I learned about heraldry and the flags of ships
and then dug further deeper into the science
of pattern recognition the ways in which

computer software can recognize a face from just
the slightest glimpse beneath a pulled down cap
can tag and link it to the sputtering electrons that leak

in binary streams from your devices replete
with tracking cookies and mutant algorithms
or the chip that was inserted into your puppy

at birth and now he walks beside you so proud
so loyal and all that you can do is wonder what
has happened to your country and who is afraid

of whom as you line up the flags of every nation
on earth and categorize them by color scheme
or by emblem or finally by levels of freedom.



Brice Maiurro

THE MAN WHO WON THE LOTTERY

The man who won the lottery,
I saw him on TV twice;
first when he won it all,
and again when he took his life.

He stood on an overpriced chair,
inside his overpriced home,
six thousand handsome square feet,
where he lived alone.

He wrapped the noose around his neck
and took his final breath.
When money couldn't cure his pain
he turned his hopes to death.

And the tv stared right back
at ten thousand watching eyes.
They never saw this coming,
but no one was surprised.



Paul Ilichko

A NEW WORLD IS DISCOVERED

I watched for planets piercing the horizon
heavy as beasts slow in their lumbering

gait as they tumbled upon themselves
and slipped beneath the quicksand

what is a nebula asked the planet
if not my decoration don't place me

in the distant corner of a universe wire
everything around me around my sensuality

and on this fertile field I see you plant your flag
as you lay claim to me in subjugating

triumph a theory of living a politics
that centers conquest over all

my beauty set in stone imaged and stored
on disks before you ravage me tearing

me bone from bone and salt from mineral
shipping my ruins at federal speed.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

I.

in this universe,
the lunar lip, taut on the crescent moon's face,
commands the foaming tidal waves,
Do not ask me how this works; I am nowhere
near the ocean.

II.

At the end of the day,
the dusk's brief gift is the lavender hue
bestowed upon the swaths of shore,
Do not ask me how this works; I am foreign
to grains that compose sand.

III.

in this written passage of time,
the mourning ritual of the moon involves repeating
the sun's vernacular: a shine, a light—
Do not ask me how this works; I am only observing
this exchange of grief in our solar system.

IV.

At night,
The navy-hued evening does not apologize
for brushing its broad shoulders against the horizon,
Do not ask me how this works; I am only a victim of
lost time.

V.

in the final sentences that are spoken before dawn,
the hourglass weeps over the midnight sand that slips
between its time-keeping teeth,
Do not ask me why this happens; I am a shadow
that gets no space
for a final say.



CRADLE ME TO THE BLUES

previously published by Blue Things Zine, #5, 2021

my fingers are floating
perturbing the silent surface
the unruffled water touches the crease of my palm
every time I try to upset the poised blues
dipping into an abyss
diving slowly, tip-toeing overseas
taking deeper breaths

I have oared through roaring blues
letting the sunlight disperse before my eyes
eluding me always
when I try to bask underneath it
buoying a deadly iridescence
I feel my chest tightening
gasping and running out of air

but I have reached the darkest blue
my body does not want
the sun, the air and the surface
this universe is calm
it bids me to stay longer
letting the waters slip
from the crease of my palm

the blue is singing me to sleep, like my mother used to



THIS IS THE END

previously published by Open Arts Forum, 2021

Silence chauffeurs loss;
a discreet chill lingers to speak;
a farewell from the arctic concludes:
if millions of anything dies
it isn't equally tragic.

Primates are most vile;
what could Jane Goodall see
in chimpanzees?

As humans
we are of different genera,
unclassified
chain-links. With the real miracles
being exploited, pillaged, gulped whole—
I know we are a natural disaster
in action.

I attempt to distract my son from us,
squabble with loose pieces
to board games—
misfits Goodwill crochets.

It is a dishonest flail on my part.
80,000 children are starving in Yemen;
I find three versions of Candyland
at my local garbage store,
not the edition from my childhood.

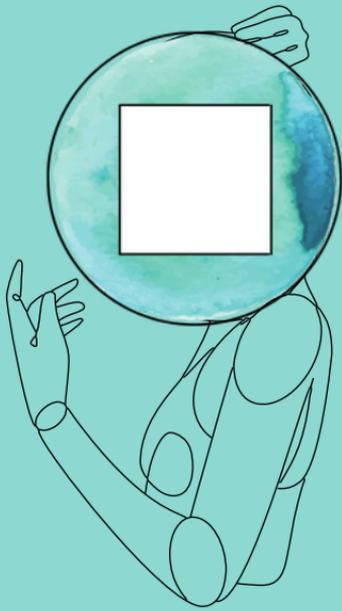
The characters on the cards speak
with their demented eyes, marked
four ninety-nine
with enthusiasm and missing parts.

Once they were drawn docile,
nostalgic shades of imagination,
an assurance of safe nonsense.

Today, they are decomposing in landfills
or have become debris inside beached whales.

My mother tags me in articles
depicting graphic images,
but never does anything more.
We stare on and scroll up.





FICTION

FICTIO

GHOSTS

previously published by Dumpster Fire Press, 2021

My mother was crazy. She was crazy in love with my dad long after he started 'working late hours.' She loved him even after his broccoli casserole was too cold, and he hit her for the first time, two years into their marriage.

There were times the biscuits were overdone, the ice cubes had not fully set, and the sweet tea wasn't chilled when he came home at random hours drunk. He choked on a chicken bone, and she stared into his face, a little void, a few seconds before saving him. She could have let him die.

I came as an afterthought.

I stared at the oatmeal hanging onto my mother's chin. Mom, I started to say, annoyed. A reflex inside my arm swept the oatmeal into a napkin and placed the wad next to a bottle of Zestril, prescribed for her high blood pressure.

Seeing the bottle, I couldn't remember if I'd already given her one. It was like all the times I'd driven the hectic stretch of road between my work and her house, unsure, after I arrived or once the streetlights disappeared into my rearview, if I'd stopped at any red lights, unable to remember any green ones.

I looked at the antidepressant, Celexa, sitting next to the Zestril, as dazed as my mother, the reason I'd stopped at the pharmacy on the way over.

"Your doctor," I said it as if my mother was going deaf and paused, searching for recognition in the lines of her forehead, "He prescribed them for your mood." I had the antidepressant's cap in my hand and was shaking one out. Her jaw slid open, and her tongue was flat, white. I stuck it on and asked, "Did I already give you your blood pressure medicine?"

She closed her mouth and made a slight sucking motion. I glanced at the bottle again and watched the napkin full of oatmeal disappear under the table. Her Shih Tzu, Hannah, was there eating the entire thing. *Oh, well*, I thought. *Just this one time*. It had happened other times too.

Mom kept sucking but never replied. Her eyes were lost marbles. She carried on that way every day after my dad died.

On the way home from her house that night, tired and struggling to see through the patches of low fog settling around my Jeep like a sinister cloud, speeding up and slowing down in frustrated intervals, I clipped an animal - or what I assumed to be an animal.

I started to cry as sudden as the impact, a well of black water that had been rising inside of me, so hard I had to pull over. Outside, I recognized the turn-off point my dad referred to as Goatman Road, and the dying, dagger-shaped tree illuminated in my headlights. In my mirror, I saw a mass stumbling near the cornfield. A person?

"No, I saw fur," I said out loud. A fur coat? It was late winter, and though the days were warming up, the nights were still cold enough for a coat.

I got out and yelled, "Hello?" and hoped for no answer. I heard stumbling. Hooves? Yes. Hooves. I wasn't certain, but I wanted to believe it was an animal.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I ran back to the car and tried to cry more, but couldn't.

"I hit something by Goatman Road last night." I told my mother as I spooned a dumpling into her mouth the following evening. The bite was small and her chewing even smaller. She swallowed and opened her mouth again.

A few years ago she would have spoken in whispers about the legend of Goatman Road, how it was rumored there was a man who bred with goats that used to live at the end of the road, that there was more than just one Goatman and possibly even a goat-girl or two running loose in the fields.

She would've said it's a bad omen or a curse, if I'd really hit the Goatman's ghost or spawn. She would have gone out and danced around my car with a bundle of burning herbs. I wished she would, but instead she sat borderline comatose.

"How is it?" I asked and looked back at the thick soup, scooped up a carrot, had it spit back, a contrived confetti spray across my face to celebrate my incompetence, some in my hair and on the floor. No carrots. Okay. It made me forget about the thing I'd hit and my fantasy of Mom coming back to life.

Hannah licked at splatters. *You'll be all orange tomorrow*—I thought, looking down at her, fishing out the rest of the baby carrots, letting them plop down onto the linoleum like Oompa Loompa fingers.

In the kitchen, I tore a bag of instant pudding open, happy to steal a moment away from my mother. Trying to push aside the creeping thoughts of last night, I thought of all the times Mom made pudding for me as a kid, as a different mother, one that became a distant memory, a person I must have imagined or dreamed up.

I stirred the pudding with a wooden spoon, letting some spill out. I started to say something towards the doorway of the living room where my mother sat, a sea cucumber, about throwing the spoon out because of the bacteria breeding in its porous skin, but didn't because it would've made me feel more alone.

Once the pudding was thick enough, I used the spoon one last time, licked it, and threw it end-over-end at the trashcan. It didn't make it. The kettle whined, and as I poured its contents into mugs next to identical bowls, I remembered another thing, something funny, for the first time in six months, since my father had died and my mother refused to speak or eat unless I was the one feeding her.

"Nancy," I said, referring to my dad's widow, setting the tray down on the coffee table. My mother looked at me for the first time in a week. "You're going to like this." I placed a dollop of dessert onto her tongue. "Not the chocolate pudding, Nancy... I was in high school, and it was Dad's weekend." I motioned towards the tea, "And Nancy had a cup of Earl Grey steeping on the end table. She went out to have a smoke while it cooled. Her cat, Sammy, came over to see what it was, realized he didn't want it and turned to jump down, but before he did, I saw a tapeworm fall from his butt into the tea. I got closer and watched it sink. Sammy left the room as Nancy came back in. She must have seen the look on my face because she demanded—*What?* I was going to tell her, but I could tell she was disgusted."

The corners of my mother's lips crawled up higher than they'd sat in a month and her eyes twisted green and yellow in the light. "Mom," my eyelids grew like a camera lens on zoom, "She drank the entire thing and never said a word." I saw my mother's teeth start to form a smile for a second and heard her almost break the silence.

Driving home, I was regretting my decision, worried I should've turned back even though the fog from the night before had lifted; the quiet inside my Jeep and warmth of the heater was making me drowsy. I rolled down my window and the rush of air was unexpected and jarring. I kept it down as I drove along more somber and sober, grateful for the biting wind keeping me awake.

I noticed the crooked tree that on this night looked less like a dagger and more like a finger pointing, my observation followed by a sense of dread. I drove on, subconsciously backing off the gas pedal in search of something my morbid curiosity couldn't stop picking at, afraid I'd not only injured an innocent animal but killed one, when I saw something at the edge of the cornfield. I had to know if it was a deer or stray dog or worse, someone's pet. The Goatman.

Getting closer, I could make out sleek brown fur and thought it must be a poor deer. I got closer and was at a crawl on the shoulder of the road when I saw the human hair splayed out, blowing. Surely not. Then, I saw a hand sticking out from the edge of the cornfield, its bright red nails glaring back at me. In shock, not sure of anything, but certain I could not have hit a girl the night before, I turned around to go back to Mom.



Back in her driveway, I sat staring into the house. It was all dark except for a soft glow, a touch lamp by her chair stuck on its dimmest setting, one with a tarnished silver base and stem, a shade made of frosted glass plates which over time had become so grease-stained no one could see the flowers underneath.

Years ago we'd seen it on display downtown where everything was half-off. The same day I found gold lipstick in the basement of the store. It became my most prized piece of makeup. I took it to a slumber party when I was ten and never saw it again. It reminded me of all the things I loved the most that were stolen from me.

I didn't know why I was there. I knew I couldn't go home. I was supposed to be her best baby, most obedient, caring, not killing.

I called first, knowing I wouldn't get an answer. I wanted the ringing to send a crack up the wall, make the roof cave on one side so we could survey the damage and fix it. I could hear the telephone from outside, shrill—screaming, screaming, screaming—me losing count.

I used my spare key to get in, hoping she might just shoot me dead. I stood at her bedroom door knocking, could hear Hannah's muffled barking, my mother shuffling, the old knob making a racket in her hand. She looked at me, tired. She had not heard until now.

"I was drifting. I can't drive. I'm going to sleep in my room," I lied. Mom reached, her hand oblong and unexpected from the crack. I drew back. She squeezed, and it was cold intending to be comfort.



Her spare room, dusty and gray, had not been mine in years. It wasn't long after I'd laid in my old bed, stiff, my doubts surfaced; the thing on the road ran across the ceiling. Dark vines spread like arthritic hands. I watched the familiar shape of the oak tree outside. It was bigger, all consuming after years of summer storms, being spared by lightning and Dad's bullets and everything that could've killed it.

I didn't make it until morning. If Mom was awake, she heard me saying, "I need to report a hit and run," over the phone outside her room. I imagined it as if we were stuck in a story, her listening for something beating loose inside one chamber of my heart, an ear pressed into the door that in the story was a floorboard. I saw myself slump as I said it.

I needed someone to blame, but there was no one.

When the police investigated my call, the road where the deer had been a girl, the road where she was running confused before I hit her, she had somehow vanished.

At sunrise, I searched the edges of the cornfield. The police were gone and probably wouldn't be back; they said they got pranks like this out by Goatman Road all the time. *Probably just kids messing around.*

I got out and walked long stretches inside the cornfield next to where I was sure I saw her body, half-expecting to find blood and fur, some confirmation that it was a deer and not a girl. Afraid I'd find a shoe or earring, purse and ID. There was nothing there, not even a dead deer. It seemed unlikely to hit a girl on a semi-desolate expanse of road. *Unless it was a prank gone wrong. Unless it was a goat-girl.*

I looked at the fur still stuck in the grill of my Jeep and grabbed some out; I folded it inside a napkin to send to the forensics lab to prove it was synthetic or mink or cow, whatever they make real fur coats out of these days, so I could say—*see, see, I told you, I'm bad. I deserve whatever I get. I'm not crazy. It's from the girl I hit. I hit her, and I ran.*

I called into work first for a few days, then indefinitely. I insisted they keep searching for the girl. Maybe an animal had drug her body away.

Restless, I thought about the kids in my homeroom, how I'd disappeared without warning, but I was in no shape to be teaching. I didn't know if I could go back, feeling as though I was without conscience, disposable. I wouldn't allow myself to go back. If they found a body, it wouldn't be a choice. I was relieved at the thought.

After a week passed, exasperated from conducting my own strenuous searches and no body to show for it, I took my fur sample to the police department. They said they'd—*humor me*—and ran a test. It came back inconclusive. I think they lied about it and threw my sample away to shut me up and close the case.

They asked if I'd had my vision tested, if I was on any prescription meds. I shook my matted head—*no*. They told me no new missing person report had been filed. They made me black tea and suggested a psychologist; it was the most mothering I'd gotten my whole life.



"I try not to feel the exhaustion and emptiness, pretend it's not there or that it's normal, but I'm not okay. I'm tired, and I've been tired, and now I'm certain I killed that girl. No one believes me." *And what about the legend? What about the Goatman?* I wouldn't mention it. My psychologist was a great listener. In our sessions, I realized that psychologists are just people you pay to care about you.

It all rose up over time as I continued on with my appointments, and I would do something unacceptable and feel confused by the setbacks. My lack of control scared me. Feelings were a foreign language; they came as nightmares climbing from the well of my esophagus like a cough, spilling into the air.

I'd lay long under bent tree limbs floating over the ceiling like a projection and try to listen in my room where it all started, and soon I stopped looking for the phantom girl. She was lost and forgotten in the cornfield because nobody cared to find her, and I had failed. Nothing would be left of her but eventually bones. The Goatman carried his daughter away to rest, to bury the legend. Nothing would ever be the same.

In the daylight I did normal things; I cooked and cleaned. I fed Mom. I grew resentful and didn't know what to call it or why, so I asked my psychologist; I witnessed deadly nightshade sprouting up like veins, violet-blue and violent, buds that never should have come at a time so cold, afterthoughts, swallowing the house.

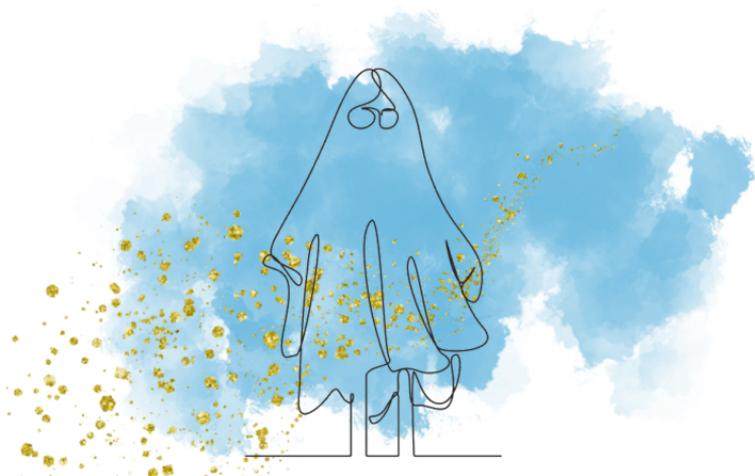
I stared at the wooden spoon on the floor next to the trash can for days, angry that I'd be the one to clean up the mess and it'd be there waiting until I did. It all seemed juvenile and shameful. I didn't know what to do with myself; I didn't want to feel anything.

I had to practice presence and sitting with myself. I organized the silverware and plates and cups. I watched shadows to feel less afraid and worthless. I let the sadness twist within me; I identified it coming up. I stopped caring if Mom ever spoke again. I knew it wasn't my responsibility.

"When Dad's liver failed, I was relieved because I didn't want him to override any more good memories." I said, setting a plate of eggs and bacon before my mother. "I'm not feeding you today, not your medicine either."

I looked back for signs of life before I walked towards the door and said, "I killed someone." There was none, so I started to say—Nancy—to jolt her, but I knew it was mean like I knew the plate would be untouched except for what Hannah could curl her tongue around, and my mother wouldn't stop her. The certainty of it all was reassuring.

The silence, deafening at times, became bearable. The shadows in the spare room told me what I needed, in the same way a cobweb tells you it needs to be wiped. I never knew what I needed before because no one ever asked me. I didn't know how I was supposed to go on that way forever like people do, like ghosts.



Stephanie Stephan

BOOGIE MAN BOOGIE

The Boogeyman can't dance. Ellie's sure of it. At midnight her door opens. He's standing there—lanky limbs, waxy holes for eyes.

"I know you can't dance," Ellie says.

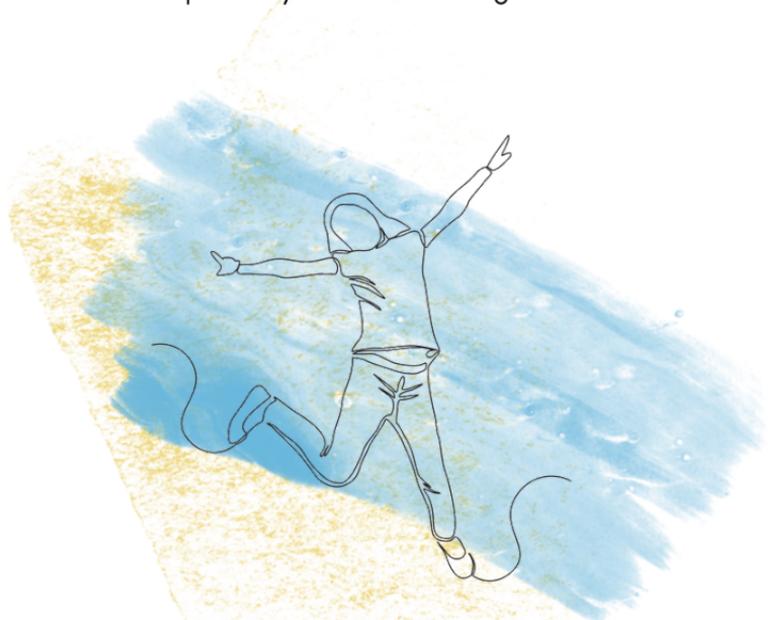
No one has confronted him about this before. It's embarrassing, really.

"Come on."

She takes his hand, teaches him to twirl, to peel-the-banana, to funky chicken, to pound-cake. The Boogeyman follows, posture like a question mark, limbs slap-flappin' around.

"That's it!"

Down the hall Ellie's parents lie awake, scared witless at the sounds that might be the furnace, or the dog, or the toilet, or a hundred other perfectly reasonable things.



MOLASSES IN WINTER

In the time it takes Annika to pour a cup of molasses, the monster will have beaten down her door.

One would expect to find Annika cowering behind her wooden spoon, but she has far too much to do. Gingerbread men don't make themselves, you know. The brown syrup slides down the inside of the jar, while the monster growls and commands her to open up! Open up! Open up!

"You can do it," Annika murmurs to the molasses. A fat drop reaches the lip of the jar, peers over the edge, clings, clings, and drops.

Annika has been baking since dawn. This is her thirteenth batch. Warm cookies line every surface.

¼ cup full.

Outside the monster leans back on aching haunches. This night is not going as planned. If he doesn't get inside and devour her soon, he'll never make it to the next house on time. Cottage doors aren't usually this resilient. Maybe she's built a barricade. He shakes the snow from his fur and rams his shoulder into the wood.

½ cup full.

Annika is on her own deadline. There are many people in the village who will be disappointed if their cookies don't arrive on time. She taps the molasses jar with the heel of her hand. Whispers encouragement.

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup full.

Enough is enough. The monster stomps, his hoof kicking up sparks. His nostrils smoke like two coals. He backs up, lowers his head, and hurtles horns-first into the door.

1 cup.

The door splinters. Annika shields her batter bowl. The monster stumbles inside, rubs his pounding head. The kitchen sways. Before him are a dozen batches of Annika. They line every surface: soft young women with buttercream braids, chocolate chip eyes, and snow-blue dresses. They quirk their pink peppermint mouths at him. The heavy smell of cinnamon and clove makes his head swell.

He grabs the nearest Annika and crams her into his mouth. Brown sugar coats his long tongue. One of these girls must be flesh and blood. But which one? There's only one way to find out. The monster takes an Annika in each fist, stuffs them into his furry maw, and chews, chews, chews. He swallows hard. Snarls. This would be easier with something to drink.

The real Annika watches as he gobbles up every cookie in her kitchen. An entire day's work lost. At last, he sucks the sugar from his clawed fingers, rolls onto the ground, and rests a hand on his bloated belly.

"You look unwell," says Annika.

"You!" he belches. "I've come to devour you! Flesh, and blood, and bones!"

"If you eat another bite you'll burst," Annika says.

He groans. "I know."

Annika helps him into her bed and prepares a mug of chamomile tea.

"Do you suppose you'll be a prince in the morning?" she asks.

"No. It doesn't work that way."

"Mm... well, I hope you feel better." She pulls the soft blankets up to his chin.

"I'm not leaving without a bite! I'll have your finger, your baby toe!"

She raises the mug to his mouth.

"Do you hear me?" he takes a sip. "I'll have your finger!"

Annika pats his shoulder and smiles. "Maybe next year."



GEOFFREY DONAHUE

Geoffrey Donahue went to the printer where he scanned his badge and printed the copies he needed of a document to help facilitate his morning meeting. Geoffrey made a mistake though. Where he only needed 10 copies, he accidentally printed 100. He had hit the 0 button excessively in error. In that moment of watching the 100 copies of the document to help facilitate his morning meeting, Geoffrey felt a great wave of soothing energy come over him. He became entranced, watching as paper after paper came shuffling down the print tray. It was mesmerizing. Geoffrey then thought nothing. Geoffrey then felt nothing.

When the 100 sheets of paper finished printing, he printed another 100, like it was nothing. Like the strings of the universe were in full command of his actions. Like Geoffrey Donahue was nothing more than a vessel for the will of the universe. Geoffrey Donahue, who was now running late for facilitating his morning meeting. Geoffrey Donahue, known around the office for his dad jokes and being a good listener. He printed another 100 copies.

Geoffrey made a mistake though. Where he only meant to print a third set of 100 copies, he accidentally printed 1000. He had hit the 0 button excessively in error. Around 73 copies into this batch of 1000 copies, the printer ran out of paper, and once again the universe commanded. Some invisible ominous puppeteer pulled strings at Geoffrey to gather paper from the nearby filing cabinet and fill the filing cabinet with papers. Geoffrey was not aware of any of this. Geoffrey Donahue was elsewhere. Geoffrey Donahue was thinking about his past. Geoffrey Donahue at last was taking the time to work his way through the daunting moments that led up to and followed his divorce from his once wife, Mrs. Eliza Donahue, who was now Eliza Brown.

A coworker or two walked by, unaware the exact details of what Geoffrey was doing. They assumed it was important and kept walking. Geoffrey continued to retrace the steps of his failed marriage as the 8 1/2 by 11 papers continued to travel magically from the guts of the printer and onto the printer tray until finally, Geoffrey had no more thoughts to think about his divorce, or his life in general for that matter.

It was then that Geoffrey Donahue's legs kicked slowly out from beneath him until he was levitating about 2 feet off the ground. Light as a feather and stiff as a board. Slowly, Geoffrey Donahue began to float upward and through the ceiling. He disappeared like Jesus on Easter Sunday, but no one saw this. They were very busy with their Monday workload, mostly catching up on emails and scheduling down meetings for the current work week. Geoffrey had ascended to another plane. The papers continued to print en masse from the printer. Later that day, the management staff pulled Geoffrey's direct reports to inform them that Geoffrey Donahue was no longer with the company.



BORN AGAIN

Fluorescent lights and petrol station coffee, nauseating. I am surrounded by the undead, bleary-eyed, peaked-in-high-school type of lives.

And now we labour like ants in a farm, a cohesive collection of parts for a corporate machine. Caffeine fuelled; a half-hour break set in sleep mode.

This is slowly dying.

Ironic for what I sell.

“Life’s full of surprises, let us protect you.”

Yes, Guardian Insurance, life is full of surprises, and in most instances, they come in the forms of an average-looking man on the train that you find yourself saying “I do” to five years later, and three children, all unplanned. Surprise!

The phone rings through my headset, a perpetual hell that remains the cause of migraines only fixed by a sedative before bed.

“Guardian Insurance, you’re speaking to Shannon, how may I assist you?”

I’ve left, gone, jumped ship, or whatever you want to call it, drowning out the cries on the other end. It’s always death, claim, death, claim, an occasional quote.

Your life is worth this much, have a lovely day.

My eyes stay glued to a postcard sitting amongst a pile of papers I'm yet to sort through. Coffee-stained, brown rings over a golden sunset and periwinkle horizon. It's still visible though, the calm sea, crystal clear and breathing over white sand.

Oh, how I fall into such a moment. Suddenly, I am there.

And it is hot, but the sea breeze is enough to keep me comfortable, and I taste the sand in my mouth, feel the crunch of it in the back of my teeth like salt.

And he is there, faceless still yet I know him, I would know him anywhere. Warm hands and fingertips that trail my bare back, a wave crashes into rocks and sends white sea foam splashing into our faces. We run up a sand dune, naked, laughing and completely unafraid. He is Adam, I am Eve, and this is paradise.

I call him Calvin, an homage to the models he was crafted in the idea of, and he is unlike anything earth-side.

He is not my husband, who leaves me breathless beneath him, crushed under the weight of our lives, under the weight of him.

He does not roll over from on top of me and turn his back, falling asleep in an instant like that was even possible.

He is not my children, screaming in the back seat of my car, fists flying, my chair kicked over and over, my headache spreading down my neck and into my back pulsating like my racing heart.

He is not slammed doors and red snotty faces, tear-streaked cheeks and big worried eyes.

He is not the dog that lies dying by the front door; ten years doesn't seem like a long time and yet there he is, brittle-boned and barely breathing, something not even overtime can fix.

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This is Calvin, who intercepts my every waking thought like a reoccurring dream, one I never want to wake from. He effortlessly plants the seeds of our paradise, grows planets from dirt and finds hidden pleasures in the darkest parts of my mind, pulls them out and births a private escape, only mine and his to share.

This is Calvin, whose fingers delicately spread apart figs and plums, strangely gentle for a man of his size.

He is the feeling of home after a lifetime lost, the look of small golden hairs on tan skin, glistening like crystals in the sun, the smell of citrus in the air, sharp and sickly sweet. I could indulge in the thought of him forever.

“Hello?”

I wake from the fantasy, breathless, heart racing and feverish.

“Yes! I’m sorry, could you repeat that? The line is quite bad.”

“Shannon; Shannon Jones?” The voice says, smooth like honey falling in pillars off a dipper like...

I’m slipping away again, but I catch myself just in time.

“Yes, that’s me, Shannon Jones!” I’m gasping for air, clutching my desk so tightly my fingertips turn white.

“It’s me, Shannon. It’s Calvin.”

No.

Impossible.

But I want it to be real, *need* it to be real. I clutch my headset to my ears, look around at the undead beside me, fingers clicking keys in a rhythm that begins the onset of a migraine.

"Calvin." I breathe.

"Yes Shan, I'm here. Come find me."

"How!" I'm desperate, can't go home, can't stay here. Anything but this.

"Just leave it all behind, Shan. Come and find me."

"Where are you? Where do I go!"

"I'm by the sea, babe; hurry, before it gets too dark to swim."

"But the kids! Who will pick the kids up from school?"

Too many responsibilities. My husband expects me home, the dog is dying by the door, I can't just leave!

"Paradise baby, no guilt in paradise." Calvin says. I hear the crashing of waves on a rock and smell citrus in the air. On the wall beside me, there is a poster I hung up on a crooked angle, bathed in a halo of fluorescent lighting.

"Choose life," it reads, and I hear a chorus of angels begin to sing.

"I'm coming!" I yell into the headset, and then I pull the damned thing off, release myself from the corporate chain and throw it to the desk in my last act of defiance.

The undead watch me wide-eyed, but I am too free to care.

I grab my bags and I think I hear a small voice from my headset say, "Hello? Hello, are you there?"

But it's too late. I am running with no intention of turning back.

I feel the water on my skin, feel the pruning of my fingers and toes, feel soothing hands in my hair that gently make their way down to my shoulders and rid me of the weight that had broken me down.

I am baptized in an ocean of pure pleasure and when I resurface, I am not a wife, nor a mother, but a woman reborn in the divine image of internal happiness.

It is painless in paradise, and I rejoice in it.



IMAGINING HART CRANE

previously published by Global Tapestry Journal, #17, 1985

He knew this was no longer Cleveland. Gone for the holy moment were the eternal fights of his parents, they landlocked in a doomed marriage. Gone were the inferior chocolates from his father's candy factory. His father gone temporarily as well, though it was Hart who had departed, along with his mother, to his grandmother's plantation on the Isle of Pines. South of Cuba on the Caribbean, it lay like a jewel on the sea that had its own soul, that in time would consume his.

Here was paradise. Here the buckeyes dissolved from memory one by one, victim to the unceasing march of sun rays. White hot rays came silently to the sandy beaches, to the coral jutting above the water surface. Rays burrowed into the skin. They warmed a heart already boiling over.

The Isle of Pines served as a refrain from his life, a tropical interruption of the fugue, the boozed, sexy and somehow sacred music of his life. Once before he had been to the island, when he was still a child.

When was it? There had been the clear pealing of cowbells in the middle of a night. But which night? Long ago, too distant to recall clearly now. Still, he wondered what the bells had tried to tell him.

In his drugged island night, Hart wandered, pausing to test himself in clearings between trees. He felt at the plants and the roots beneath them. On his knees, he could feel it all slipping away, out of his reach, deep into fertile ground.

He gently stroked the shoot that pierced the air beside him. And he was aware of his very own flowering.

He was also aware that his own circle of life might fall short. His arc might diminish in the tropical sun. It was chance, the same as it was for people who lived where snow fell, in cities where wind was blocked by white buildings, in small, fog-laced towns. It was as simple as a child's world to him now.

But his was a much different child's world than that of the idiot boy, an island child who had hold of the heavens with a kite he sent there. He held the kite string in his hand and scoured the sky, watching and waiting, who knew for what. Often Hart would come face to face with the idiot boy on the island roads. The boy wandered beneath the wide, spreading arms of blooming mimosas, investigated pebbles and the world half-hidden by undergrowth.

Hart would go out, his sailor whites dazzling in the sunlight, and come across that boy. There were stories about that boy, who had the habit of showing off his phallus, one of enormous proportions, to the island children. They would shriek with laughter as he performed for them, an idiot boy shaking his penis on the idiot wind.

On mornings and in afternoons of varying light, Hart came to find a quiet, strangely primitive beauty about that boy. He would call out to him, only to hear a cretin response. They would always be worlds apart. But the memory of the boy would stay with Hart.

"Hart! Hart! Wake up and shoo the cows out of the yard. Hart, are you awake?"

He had been sleeping, swimming deliciously on the white effervescence of his bed. The tropical moon made his bed glow like phosphorous. He slept on a sea of flowing white, on a drowsy back bay of veronal. He could hear the muted hooting of ships across the water. The sea, always the wide, welcoming expanse, was calling him even then.

“Hart! Wake up! The cows are trampling the flowers!”

Now almost awake, he found his clothes and put them on. Still dreaming, he passed the shadowy forms of his mother and grandmother and stepped through the door into the somnambulist’s night. The dog trotted and sniffed along beside him.

Together they routed the cows and the shadows of cows, chasing them into the darkness of the night bush, sent them crashing into the fern forest and into the sleeping, eucalyptus world.

And then Hart himself disappeared. The dog, masterless, returned to the house. The hair on the dog’s back was still standing up from the battle with the cows. Hart had gone elsewhere.

Dazed by veronal, he began running. He ran like a hurricane wind, anxious to come across everything that eluded him. He would run for as long as it took to shake loose the demons.

He ran through the heavy blackness of the island bush, onto the ghost white sand where ebony water pulsated. He ran across the stretch of coral beach, warm water splashing his chest. It was not yet time to make the final plunge, to abandon all things to tides.

It was hours later when he returned to the house. He emerged from the bush onto the cow trampled lawn, still panting from his race with the phantoms. He slept for a long time, caught up with images of the idiot boy who guided a kite through the starry night sky, with visions of whitecaps closing in around him.

And if he did not yet understand why, he knew that, at least for the holy moment, one season of the storm had passed.



Divisha Chaudhry

HEAD WATER

previously published by Eclipse Zine, 2021

Yesterday

The geyser is roasting water.

It comes out murky, colloidal and yellowish because of that.

So much heat, so much water. I turn the tap right for shower. Some misty droplets fall on my skin.

Brown, the water turns after meeting me. The water adapts like a chameleon, the water remembers. It remembers my skin and the heat of the geyser. It covers me with its wetness and adjusts to become favourable for us both. But in the process, loses its own no-colour. Like plastic.

How would one know if transparent plastic scraps are present in the water supply? It might taste and smell like plastic, I think, and give off black fumes when burned. I'd test that after the shower. Test by burning water—if it turns black and volatile. For now, I am remembering this water like it remembers me, or some other beings that are no longer alive. Their memory living in this water's memory passes onto me. *Telepathy with the dead.* Yes, I am feeling something.

Hair haywired. Red cloth is my favourite. Bite marks from my pet wolf. Clips fluttering loose. Feet dangling by the field. Slipping, slipping into the marshland—flaying my arms for the stalks. Screams, shrieks... holes swallowing me whole... so many voices, so many heads. Hush, Hush. Slithering my way into the pits—rising, rising, rising... engulfing them in one, two, three—here, carrying them with me and splashing, splashing all over you.

I feel the geyser water enveloping me and stifling my way out. I cannot turn. I cannot look away. I have to thrash my way out and move to turn the tap off. Steam is all around me, caging me. *Huffing, huffing, breathing down my neck. Secreting the moisture over my limbs. Sticking me, taking me, caging me...*

I try again and turn the tap off. Phantom hands fall back and the memories disappear. I rub the back of my neck, a current passes through me. Goosebumps cover my skin—cold, it's suddenly so cold. Maybe they'll trouble me again tomorrow—those images. *Or someone else.* I grab my white towel off the hook and wipe the droplets lying solitary on my skin, freeing myself of water's remaining grip. No more dead-living memories. No more hot, geyser-roasted water. I'll mix the cold and hot water tomorrow. Maybe that will kill those memories.

Good, good idea.

Today

I dip my toes under the sprinkler. *Bare feet treading down the field* – the water grabs me as if urging me not to go further. I standstill. I unclench my fist. I surrender and I sink.

Today I give bits of myself to water—cold water unlike yesterday. I go from bottom to above. The water rolls down after sloshing. *Eager to cover me whole.* The more the cold slips into me, the more it wipes yesterday's memories off me. It takes me with it and gives me what others lost. Slowly the images flash again, but unlike yesterday, they are stories of today.

A yellow flower washed aside. Rain droplets mimicking morning dews. Rainbow glaze in oily puddles. Reflection of a pale blue sky in a pond. Frogs hopping in a group. A kitten licking her paw... arms widespread, giggling with each drop... dripping, dancing, finally falling... and catching a leaf, it dips and drags along—I flow, I flow, I flow carrying its greenness with me...

The images keep flashing, as I am trapped inside the miniscule molecule-bubble water makes. Giving me glimpses of its day—what all it has seen. It feels cold—this water, but its essence is filled with natural, mundane moments that make my senses warm. I sigh as the cold water collides with my exhaustion. It is weird how this natural element is ebbing my loneliness by giving me its story. Glimpses of the distance it has travelled to meet me. The wild feeling it has gathered as anecdotes—a recipe for happiness. Snapshots it has collected along the way... *for me.*

Yesterday, the hot-geyser water was sucked off these moments. It adapted to the harshness of heat - its agitation and suffocation. Death smothered its way in then and gulped all these happy memories, replacing them with its cold touch. It is weird how detached I felt with death—considering how close we both have been. Maybe it was the unfamiliarity of it that made me feel so cold. The water wayward and violent, dehydrating me completely—not something I needed yesterday.

I take one last sip of this cold water. Bask in its kindness. A minute or two pass, and I turn the shower off. I wish I could stay here forever. Live in this absurd story of cold water and see what it has seen. Feel what it has felt. Stay in its comfort and be happy.

Happiness, happiness, happy... so happy.

Tomorrow

The geyser is roasting water.

I mix the cold and hot water—I do what I am supposed to do.

The water comes out murky, colloidal and yellowish because of the heat.

But it isn't like yesterday.

I turn the tap right for shower. Lukewarm droplets fall on my skin. Pale brown, the water turns after meeting my skin. The water adapts like a chameleon; the water remembers. It remembers my skin as if I am one of the routes it takes every day. I wonder if it takes what I feel and deposits it on someone else's body. A cacophony of thoughts intersecting—we all merge into one, becoming like the other.

Swapping emotions of one another and putting them on when we all bathe under the same water. I wonder what memories ice-capped water has stored in it then... or who?

The water steadily glides over my skin. Hot and cold produces a mixture of both, which is neither of the two. And... I can't feel. I can't feel anything from this mixture. It is not dead. It is not alive. Just flowing down, washing away the dirt—it is just... water. I soak my hair under the shower. The water blankets my head. Hushes me with its gurgles as it meets the floor. I can't... understand what it is trying to tell me. There's a muffled rumble it is carrying... or crying with?

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I don't hear what it feels or feel what it feels. The touch of this water is nothing. And its presence feels like its colour. Chameleon-like. Invisible-like. Maybe today it is lost within itself. Or maybe it is numb like me. Just sprouting out, descending, taking off the dirt and draining down the sinkhole. Taking my numbness with its own numbness. An old, rusty feeling, draining just like that. Taking so many spirits with it. I thought this was how death would feel. I never thought this was how water would feel. But it does today. It is stale and pale. Neither around me nor within me.

I take the soap I use every day and scrub off, longer than I usually do. I am waiting. Waiting for that voice to seep into my mind and instruct me. I can't feel any hands choking me, which is good but I can't feel anything grabbing me either. I am alone. Just... one, now. The icy feeling of geyser water was so much better than this void. Voiceless, senseless, aimless... dipped in no memories. No cherished moments.

A lull looms over me.

I turn off the shower and wipe myself off any residual nothingness. I wipe thoroughly—taking more time in seeking even a single drop. Scratching my body red in the process—scratches that look like bite marks under the bathroom light. Yet... I feel the same. I feel like me. It is as if the water today was mirroring me. Mirroring what I am made of. But that can't be possible. Water takes memories—it breathes them. It pours what it knows and remembers. It reminds you of what all it has seen and been through. And along the way gives you what you lost. No one is born without the capability of collecting such fragments. We all have our memories, uniquely ours that belong to us... *or do we?*



Stephanie Stephan

OF WOLVES AND WINE

Close your eyes.

Now open.

In a blink, Ector will be bitten by a wolf. Too much raspberry wine has addled his brain, and he's wandered beyond the castle walls. See him now, his back against a thorn bush, staring down red teeth, wet tongue, and unblinking sulfuric eyes.

Ector is sweating raspberries.

Still... he can't help thinking about how good it feels to be seen for the first time. The wolf changes in the flickering light. Now it's a lap dog—now, the woman he loves—now, his own reflection.

Don't vomit.

No sudden moves.

Close your eyes.

Now open.



LETTING GO

“Not happening, Ollie?”

Ollie looked at his favorite tree, then at me. He inched forward until his stiff little hind legs were pointed straight back, then splooted on the grass.

This was the fourth time I’d taken him out. Yesterday, when no one was home, he’d piddled in his bed where he lay. I don’t know how, since both his food and water bowls were barely touched, but the apathy and weakness in his face told us what we needed to know.

Last week, the vet said to be prepared for something like this. Everything will begin to shut down, without warning.

If you like, I can put him down now, or you can take him home and let him be comfortable for as much time as he has left.

Willow and I had agreed. Now, while she helped Cara change into the dress they had picked out for the sixth grade graduation dance, I sighed and dropped down beside him, probably on top of old neighborhood dog-news, and scratched him behind his ears the way he liked. He closed his eyes and panted softly. My eyes blinked rapidly a few times; a habit of mine, kind of like a twitch. It tends to happen when I’m at a bit of a loss.

Ollie perked up when Cara appeared in—how did the website describe it; a ‘watercolor garden belted party dress’?—her thick dark brown hair tied back with a floral pin. And was that a hint of pale lipstick, or just gloss?

"Wow," I said, blinking to control the mist in my eyes, "don't you look beautiful. What do you think, Ollie?"

He lifted his head and appeared to nod, though that may just have been incidental movement from the effort of panting.

Her first dance. We had been anxious until Willow had latched on to the dress-buying project. Projects calmed her, and when she was calm, it settled me. Now as she appraised our daughter I saw Willow's evaluation face, the same expression she wore when she evaluated her pottery.

Cara bent down and took over the scratching. A wisp of hair fell across her face. "Maybe I should stay here," she said.

"Don't be silly," Willow said, bending over and tucking the hair behind Cara's ear. "You've been looking forward to this dance for months. Ollie will be fine."

Ollie squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them. Blink once, for yes?

Cara turned to me. "Daddy?"

We hadn't told Cara what the vet had told us. As far as she knew Ollie was just not feeling well. I shrugged. "I've tried to give him water and food. He's been like this all day. There really isn't much you'd be able to do for him." I stood and brushed my pants. The backside was damp from the long, coarse grass.

"Why don't you take Cara to the dance?" Willow suggested.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yes. You've been with Ollie all day. Let him and I have a little time together." She eased herself to the ground and gently rubbed her thumb on his forehead. We expected him to lift his nose to look at her, but he closed his eyes and continued to pant.

As we walked to the school I kept the topic on the dance—was everyone going, had her friends Kimberly and Aisha bought outfits, had she seen the decorations. It felt false. I was pressing—as a guy, those subjects didn't interest me much. Besides, I wasn't doing it because she wanted to talk and needed encouragement. I was doing it to distract her, filling the speech balloons with topics that I hoped would shimmer like presents under the Christmas tree.

A block away from the school, we could hear the music. The front doors were open, as were the gym doors, but it wasn't like when we'd come for basketball games. The gym was black; no, not black, but dark, dim. Flashes from strobe lights illuminated frozen heads and shoulders of sixth graders. The tan linoleum of the hall ended with transition-stripping, and then the hardwood of the gym darkened into a night-clubby atmosphere. The principal, Mr. Gregson, stood in the doorway like an undersized bouncer in a jacket and tie; the first time I'd ever seen him not in jeans.

"Hi Cara. You look lovely," he said, then grinned at me.

"Thank you," she replied.

"Hi," I said as I followed Cara past Gregson.

"Sorry." I felt his fingers touch my elbow. "No parents except the chaperones allowed inside tonight."

A whisper of panic flamed through my belly.

"Cara?" I called. She was already fading into the shadows. "Wait for me or Mommy after it's over, okay?"

She nodded.

"Have fun." I added, but my voice cracked and I don't know if she heard me. A girl called her name and I heard giggles, and my daughter disappeared. My eyes twitched.

Gregson grinned again. "See you at eight."

I feigned a smile and left the school, the music slowly shrinking away behind me.

I wanted to give Willow time with Ollie, so I texted to let her know I had dropped Cara off and was going for a walk.

As I wandered, I had the sensation that the world had raced on ahead of me, like jet lag, where everything around me was in a different zone. My movements felt imprecise, as if my feet had melted away, or were numbed with ice. I monitored my steps and balance, but nothing seemed off.

At the park halfway between the school and our house, I leaned against an oak. The musty odor reminded me that the last few days of rain had revived the soil after a dry spring. New weeds sprouted, ever hopeful, between the roots of the tree and the grass that had dried from the city's efforts to conserve water. This was also likely home to more dog-news, but it was the furthest corner from the playground and afforded the most privacy, so I sat. Willow was right; staying all day with Ollie had worn on me and after seeing my daughter swallowed up by the darkness, I needed to gather myself. I stretched and tried to force my neck and shoulders to relax.



We were a week from solstice, so the sun was high above the horizon. I watched a mother in the play area guiding her toddler over the log stumps and bridges. He wore a floppy sun hat. His mother wore none. She kept trying to take his hand as he maneuvered through the passageways but he squawked, flapping his hands to chase hers away. I couldn't make out her words though I caught her admonishing tone when he stumbled and sat unceremoniously on his diaper. He accepted her help to stand, but then was on his way again.

Cara hadn't been like that. She had always been willing to accept our help and our advice. I'd walked those stumps many times beside and behind her, slid down the slide with her between my legs, but she was also solid and capable on her own. The first time she took Ollie for a walk by herself, I watched the minutes tick away, but after that, never gave it a second thought. In my mind I saw her in her grad dress, bent down, scratching Ollie, the expression on her face serious, intent. Maybe willing Ollie to health.

When we took Ollie to the vet, Cara had been away on a school camping trip. We tried to figure out what to tell her and Willow said, "We don't know how long this process is going to take. No need to worry her until we have to."

I'd agreed, for lack of a better suggestion. But when? And how?

The toddler in the play area let out a squawk and began wailing. His mother carried him, arms extended as if he were a bag of smelly diapers. As she strapped him into his stroller, he twisted and fought and screamed so loudly that a German Shepard on the other side of the playground barked out of concern or annoyance.

Where I grew up, we lived in an apartment, just outside downtown. Groceries, stores, movies, and only two blocks to school, but pets weren't allowed in the building. I couldn't even take the class hamster home for weekends. My mother wouldn't have permitted an animal anyways. Too much trouble, too much mess. Willow and I moved far out to the suburbs where there are houses and lawns and fences and where we could afford a place with a garage that we turned into a studio for her to work and teach from. A great place to raise a family. And to have a dog.

How do we know if we've made the right choices for Ollie? Should he have gone to the vet yesterday? Or should we have put him down when the vet offered? And should we have told Cara, or is she too young for this? We'd postponed telling her. Now it's the same thing as having decided not to tell her. It had progressed from being unmentioned to skipped over and now we were actively hiding it. Soon it would evolve into a secret, festering and poisonous.

I watched a few other families use the playground or tour their dog around, checked my email, watched a sports blooper video my friend suggested, worried about Cara, thought about Ollie off and on. Willow texted to say nothing had changed. I replied that I would pick Cara up. The warmth of the sun was soothing, the soft humidity and the distractions so relaxing that by the time I left, my brain had unknotted.

With the lights on, the night club was a gym again, albeit one with white and red streamers of crepe paper and a banner reading "GRAD '19" hanging from one basketball backboard to another. Cara was saying goodbye to Aisha and her mother as I arrived. I smiled at other parents and their kids and we made our way out the doors.

"Did you have a good time?"

"It was nice."

"Lots of dancing?"

"A little."

"With boys?"

"In groups, mostly."

She didn't seem chatty. Not down, just not as excited as I expected. The pit of my stomach relaxed and I was surprised how relieved I was just to have my daughter back. That, plus sitting in the park had mellowed me, so we walked in silence for a while.

A woman was reading under the tree in the park, a golden Lab stretched out nearby. The dog turned its head to watch us as we passed, pink tongue with black spots lolling.

"Daddy?" Cara said.

"Yes?"

"I think Ollie might be dying."

I was shocked, but my meditative mood kept it from penetrating fully. Almost calmly, I responded, "Why do you think that?"

She said, "Aisha's cat Herbie was like Ollie. He was old and fell sometimes when he tried to jump onto the windowsill. We used to help him up." She stepped around a wet ice cream wrapper on the sidewalk. "Aisha said at the end he stopped eating and just lay around. Like Ollie."

"When was that?"

"Last summer. Before we went to visit Grandma."

I wasn't sure what to say but I didn't want to leave too much silence. "I think you might be right. Ollie is very old for a dog."

She shook her head as if to chase away a fly. "I didn't want to say anything. I thought you and mommy might not know. I didn't want to worry you."

I froze. Some shell of tension that I hadn't been aware of crumbled and fell away. The sun prickled my skin. From the other end of the park I heard the music of the ice cream truck; Pop Goes the Weasel, and I became aware of glare reflecting off the chrome of cars along the road.

Cara had taken a couple steps before she realized I wasn't there. Now she stared at me, eyebrows furrowed, wondering.

I walked to her, bent down, and hugged her. Her skin was warm and soft and a little clammy from the gym, and she was taller and narrower than the last time I had held her this close. I smelled the beachy coconut scent of her shampoo and caught a tang of preteen body odor as she put her bony arms around my neck.

I hugged her tight against my chest, then stood and lifted her to the air before letting her down and kissing her wet cheek. Tears were streaming from her eyes. I bowed my head and touched my forehead against hers.

"Let's go home and have a talk with Mommy," I whispered, "and see how Ollie is doing. Okay?"

She nodded, rubbing her forehead against mine. I took her hand, something I hadn't done since she was smaller, when I used to guide her to make sure she stayed close enough, when her arms were shorter and she had to reach up to hold my hand. Now her head was as high as my elbow and we walked, neither needing to guide the other.

I felt something at the back of my calf and turned to find the yellow Lab sniffing at my leg. It looked up at me, tongue still lolling, tail wagging.

"Jas-per," called the woman from the park, "come here."

I reached down to scratch its head, as did Cara. The dog gave a quick grunt then turned and ran back to its owner.



ERASURE

Only in an abstract, distant sense does Jonathan know he will remember this day for the rest of his life, almost like an echo of a sound that has yet to be made and yet heard all the same, for when he tries to consider the rest of his life as it is at that moment—and he does not try too hard, neither capable or eager to dwell too deeply—he only can see the end of this day, and the hours of the coming night that will be empty of sleep and full of thoughts he does not want to entertain. Tomorrow both exists and does not exist, and, in its existence and non-existence, it is equally terrifying and almost soothing.

When he sees his daughter run towards him, he attempts to pull his mind from dwelling on the night ahead and the thoughts it will contain, and the individual barbed holes—abysses with teeth, he sometimes thinks of them—each of those thoughts hold at their centre, and though not entirely successful, he feels his world slightly right its axis as she jumps into his arms and shouts “daddy!” loudly into his ear; there is a kind of erasure here, he knows—and he knows all about erasure, or at least the need for it, the desire—his daughter only knowing him as ‘daddy’ and not by his name, a removal of everything he is, in her eyes and mind, but his role as her father, though her erasure is unconscious and harmless while his own is deliberate and swollen with harm.

He has not seen her for almost four weeks, or twenty-six days to be precise, the longest he has ever gone without seeing her since she was born seven years ago, a situation he feels is as unnatural as it is heart-breaking.

The last time he saw her it was only for a few minutes—he could not hold his tears at bay, or the howl of pain that would accompany those tears, any longer than that and he had not wanted her to see him in such a way, or even worse, frighten her—as he collected some clothes and toiletries from the family home. Three days after that day he checked himself into the psychiatric ward of the local hospital, his hands shaking as though in spasm, his mind a roiling coil of fire, and his throat still sore from the tie he had tried to hang himself with, only finding sense—or, more apt perhaps, sense finding him—when his daughter’s face had flashed before his eyes even as bursts of white flame began to dance in his vision, causing his fingers to scratch at the soft silk pulled tight, guilt and regret warring inside him at what he had been willing to do to erase himself from the world, to quiet the roar of broken noise in his head and heart.

Two weeks passed in that place, and it is two weeks he does not want to dwell on, though he knows, in a less abstract way, that not a single day will pass when he does not think of that ward with people who, while more broken than him, had been broken for so long they had made a sort of peace with their cracked and fragile psyches, making them appear less broken than he was; one of the thoughts that keeps him awake at night—one among many, all seemingly wider than his mind can contain—is that maybe he is more broken than he knows himself to be and those other poor souls in the hospital appeared less broken than he was because they were in fact less broken.

Over his daughter’s shoulder, he sees his wife walk towards him, and it is this he will remember for the rest of his life—Jonathan, surprising himself and possibly even his wife, will live into his 70’s, at which point he will pass suddenly, almost painlessly, walking up the stairs of his rented house he lives in alone, as he has lived alone since the end of his marriage, the love he still holds for his wife, even after everything, the second last thought he knows, the very last one being of his daughter and how proud he is at the wonderful life she has made for herself—

—not her walking towards him, though he feels a shard of pain twist laboriously in his heart at the sight of her, a pain somewhat akin to the brief burst he will feel as he sinks to his knees on the stairs when he is seventy years of age, but because she will not walk away and leave them on their own, keeping them both in her eyeline as they walk to the nearby playground.

She will do the very same thing the next four times he sees his daughter—all outdoors, in the presence of crowds, and all dictated by his wife, she choosing the days and the times—after which she will text him two days before he is next to see his daughter, telling him that their daughter can now stay over with him one night every second weekend. He knows her thinking behind this of course, and it disgusts him that she could think his crippling need to cease his existence, to erase himself and all the noise and fire of his mind, a need which long predates him meeting his wife, one which lies relatively dormant inside him until some event or action ‘triggers’ it, like a bullet waiting to be fired—in this case, his wife leaving him for a man she had been engaged in an affair with for the last two years of their marriage, the pride with which she admitted this like a second wound inflicted in the middle of the initial wound caused by her informing him she was leaving—could ever mutate into a need to harm his daughter, but he does not have the strength, either physically or mentally, to argue this or anything with her, not at that moment, and not for years to come, all his energy directed towards surviving the depression that has plagued him for as long as he can remember.

He knows of course that the argument could be made that his suicide would, if not physically, at the very least mentally, harm his daughter, casting a heavy shadow over her life, but he does not want to dwell on this, nor the guilt he still feels, and will always feel, that he had been so willing to end his life, regardless of the effect it would have had on her, his erasure of himself leaving a mark on her being that would never completely disappear—

—It will be a need he will never be able to discard, but he will never try to act upon it again, mostly through medication, regular therapy sessions, and shrinking his life down to his daughter and a couple of close friends, thereby reducing the chances of finding himself in any ‘triggering’ situations.

In the months to come, as they begin the long process of dismantling a life together, via solicitors, while still forever connected through their daughter—after the divorce the only communication between them will concern their daughter—this awareness of his wife’s all too apparent opinion of him, of the danger she imagines he poses towards his daughter, will adversely affect his recovery, as too will the dismantling process itself, each letter from his solicitor like a bomb he knows will explode in a fury of blinding light and shrapnel but not exactly when it will do so.

His wife will even go so far as to use his stay in the hospital, along with everything he has ever told her about his depression—all tales told, true and unvarnished, near the start of their relationship, as they stood on the cusp of admitting their love for each other, almost like a warning both to her and himself—against him to explain her actions both before the end of their marriage and after, even going so far as to slightly alter moments of their life together to better suit her narrative, not necessarily painting him as a monster but as someone who it was difficult and occasionally stressful to live with; “I sometimes feared I would come home and find him dead” she will say at one stage, the words conveyed to him through his solicitor, and he will have to leave the room and rush to the bathroom to cry and vomit, his breakfast of that morning scalding his throat and his tears burning his eyes, his very heart twisted inside him at the words, and, also, he cannot deny, though he will admit it no one, a sense of horror that this was how she might have genuinely felt, that he could have, however unintentionally, inflicted this upon the woman he had loved from the very moment he had set eyes upon her at a mutual friend’s birthday party so many years before, her smile all he could see when he was introduced to her, her voice all he could hear when she said his name.

Jonathan holds tightly to his daughter as tears threaten in his eyes, for a moment believing—as he has believed many times over the past few weeks, even as a deeper, more primal part of his mind mocks him for these moments as nothing more than magical thinking—that his wife’s relationship with this other man will soon come to an end, and she will allow him, Jonathan, to return home and the three of them can be a family again. Because that is what they are, after all, a family, a unit of three, three made one. Again, in that deep primal part of himself, that part that can dispassionately examine all the evidence laid before him, like, he imagines, a coroner standing before a body they are about to cut open—and, that primal, cold, knowing part of him cannot help but see their marriage as a still corpse lying between them, the sweetness of its decay beginning to sting their noses—he knows it is a cruel hope, a wounding hope even, but if he learnt anything in the hospital, apart from the fact that he will never go back there again, not willingly at least, it is that even a cruel hope is a better than no hope, especially when suicidal thoughts are all too capable, eager almost, of slipping into the absence left by that missing hope, spreading possessively into every corner of that empty space—he will hold onto this hope for as long as he can, and while it will wound him, and deeply so, it will also, paradoxically, aid him, its mania-infused energy pushing him to endure the nights—those nights devoid entirely of sleep—when the most senseless thoughts make perfect sense.



Jonathan lowers his daughter to the ground, and she runs towards the playground, calling to him to come and push her on the swings. He does so, and in that movement, turning to follow his daughter, he turns his back on his wife. The sharp pain in his chest eases while simultaneously his hope of her taking him back increases, passing from almost shapeless possibility to solid surety—he even feels his breath catch in his throat—and by the time he reaches the swing where his daughter sits waiting, looking at him as though she has been waiting for hours, her head tilted in the very same way that her mother tilts her head when looking at him—she is looking more like her mother with every passing year and less like him—he tells himself that everything is going to be okay, everything, eventually, will be okay.



DOCTOR'S OFFICE, FEBRUARY 25

"It is just another part," I tell myself.

I joked with the physician's assistant this morning, referring to myself as an empty tin can, thumping my rib cage as she writes down my surgical history. We don't know, at this point in the day, that this list is about to grow by one.

I let a man take pictures of me with my clothes off but he swore it was just for my chart, and I think: "that's a line I haven't heard."

I am tired.

Tired in this bed, on this goddamned paper bed, tired of waiting, tired of being here again, tired of every part of this body.

"God doesn't make mistakes" but my appendix, my ovaries, my cervix, my uterus, my legs, my spine, my own flesh; they don't believe in God anymore.

It would be nice to wear a bracelet that didn't have my name on it, a list of drug allergies and "fall risk". I have been falling for 40 years; every part removed is a little less mass for gravity to pull down.

The man said he needed to "consult his colleagues," and I thought, "that's a funny way to say you're showing my nudes around the office." After that, I pulled my clothes on, I went to work. I didn't sit for a moment to consider ~~mourning~~ mourning.

It is just another bracelet, another hospital bed, another incision,
another scar. It is just another part, another mistake.

The quarter moon overhead is more whole than I could ever be.



DOCTOR'S OFFICE, NOVEMBER 12

The doctor prescribes an antidepressant, a low dose; half the children's dose low, just to try it. See if it sticks.

He listens to my symptoms. He laughs in the right moments when I joke as a defense mechanism. He listens to my heart. He asks if it races.

I think of the leaves, the school of red and brown ones that raced across the street on my way here.

I tell him, "only when I'm really anxious."

He stops, turns back to me. "Do you often have panic attacks?"

"I don't know. Is that what that pounding is?"

I think of the raindrops, fat and heavy on my windshield, maybe a little bit of ice at the edges. He is talking:

"...to take the edge off..."

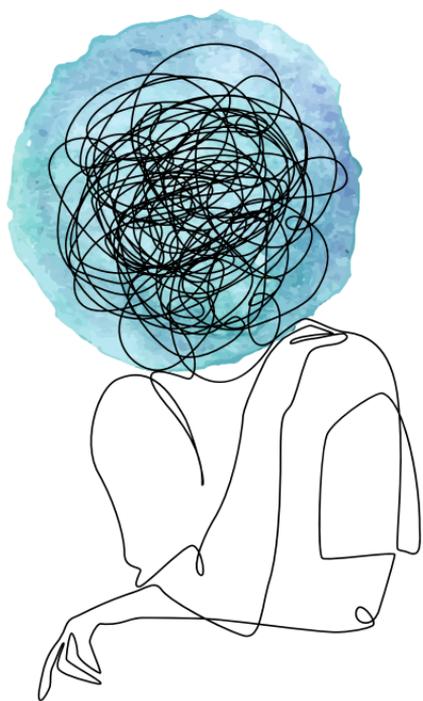
The edges. Just a little bit.

"Probably not bad to have this on hand for panic attacks. They'll make you sleepy though."

I joke about making sure my panic attacks are only at bedtime. He laughs.

The sky is sleepy-gray on the way home. Cold rain sweeps through and piles of wet leaves stick to cars and roads, sticking to everything but the trees they fell from.

I think of his words. Just to try it. See if it sticks.



DOCTOR'S OFFICE, DECEMBER 14

From the parking lot, I smell leaves burning somewhere, and I wonder if this is a good thing or a bad thing. Should we burn on purpose? There are things living in the mess, they function there. They sleep there.

"Let's try increasing your dose up to the baseline. How are you feeling?"

"I'm so tired I can't function. Last week I couldn't stop exercising, ninety plus minutes daily. I wanted more but my family missed me. This week, I'm too tired to tie my shoes."

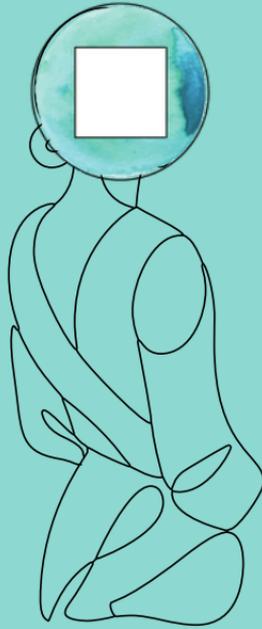
"That sounds like depression. Are you sleeping well?"

I don't tell him that I dream about tornadoes or broken glass or my dead dad.

"Not really."

He asks if I've taken the medication for panic attacks, and I tell him the one time I needed it, it was 10:30 AM and I didn't have time for side effects. He tells me to take one tonight and that "there are worse things than a good night's sleep."

In a pile of leaves somewhere, insects have bed down for winter. They sleep too heavily to smell the gasoline.



NONFICTION

NON FICTA

IN VENICE

The Venetian glass necklace cost a hundred euros, which was almost a hundred and fifty dollars due to the exchange rate that summer. I'd just watched a classically trained artisan create a half-dozen Venetian glass horses with a long metal hook and a blowtorch. I remember the weight of the fire being so hot, I checked to make sure my eyebrows were still there just as closely as I looked at the little glass necklace that hung around my neck. It was the size of a nickel, little white stars against a night-blue sky that reminded me of that Van Gogh painting that probably would have been famous even if he hadn't cut his ear off.

One hundred euros. It seemed like a fortune back then. It still does. I checked my eyebrows one more time, took the necklace off, put it down. I was backpacking across Europe. Venice was only one stop of many. The longer my money lasted, the longer I could keep going, the longer I could postpone the inevitable reality of post-college life.

My husband took his first wife on a trip to Venice the year before she died. It wasn't the same summer I backpacked Europe, but in my mind it is. I imagine that I passed them on one of the many sinking streets, both of us unaware that her life was ending right as mine was beginning, the tumor in her brain already growing back, that trip nothing more than a momentary relief.

A few months ago, when I was organizing our apartment, finding room for baby clothes, I found a rolled-up canvas the size of a postcard. It was a painting of the courtyard in Venice where I had lunch after I decided not to buy that necklace. I asked my husband about it, even though I already knew where it came from.

He said, "Denisse wanted that."

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

*If you have never spent a
winter far away from your
friends, read this:*

*'Be grateful for the kindly
friends that walk along your
way;*

*Be grateful for the blue of
blue that smile from day to
day;*

*Be grateful for the health
you own, the work you find to
do*

*For 'round you are those
less fortunate than you.'*

-- **Author Unknown**

She exists on, remaining in perpetual
vagueness;
a mystery lingering behind a collection
of beguiling words;
the lyrical flow of a murmuring brook,
continuing to whisper through time
amongst the yellowing pages.

It's fitting, in a way, that the inner workings
of your mind are forever
immortalized
as *author unknown*.

I don't know much about you,
but I do know this:

Your name was Clara Lyons,
a sound that glides off the tongue like a
folk song;
you survived
the Great Depression,
childbearing as a teenager,
a son being drafted into
The War,
and mental illness
during a time
when there really was no treatment.
You found beauty
in life's never-ending conundrums,
even when the silver linings
were but hairline fractures,
imperceptible
to most;
fissuring deep beneath the surface.

I wonder if you wore your hair long,
if you cried when you laughed,
if you danced around the kitchen
while making plum pudding.



I don't know much about you,
but I do know this:
I know your mind.
You were a daydreamer,
a storyteller,
a lover of all things sentimental;
poetic. We may be but
Two Souls that never crossed earthly paths,
never had the cards of Fate to meet,
but you're still much more than
author unknown
to me.
I may not have known *you*,
but I know
your overall essence, your
pneuma.

You exist on, remaining in perpetual
vagueness,
within the walls of my profuse
imagination—
a priceless, hallowed heirloom
I like to believe
I inherited from
you.



DIEM, THE TAILOR

As my grandmother began to die, dementia crept in at every sunset. “Your father and me,” she’d tell me at twilight in the hospice, “we go ăn chả giò and uống bia.” My grandmother had not seen my father in years, nor had they ever nhậu together with eggrolls and beer.

But it was with clear eyes and certain voice that she instructed me to get married in a green and yellow áo dài. “That would look best on you,” she told me in Vietnamese. I did not ask questions. She was the kind of person who always hung up the phone before saying good-bye. We left it at that, decided, and shortly thereafter she was released to go home where she died in the middle of the night, facedown and purpled.

When I asked my mother for help in finding the dress, she seemed excited. “Those were your great grandmother’s favorite colors,” she explained. “The green was for the colors of the bottles lined up on a fence on her street in Viet Nam. Yellow for the flowers.” Until that moment, all I had known about my great grandmother Mot Thi Le had been the image of her in the black and white portrait; she grimaced and her knee-length gray hair was wrapped in a bun that she would later shaved to mourn the death of her husband—another black and white photo on an altar. Now my inherited memories of her had color.

I went online to pull up pictures of Vietnamese brides so we could narrow down the styles. My mom’s excitement faded into “hmmm” and “okaaaay” elongated in doubt until she spotted a picture of an obese woman squeezed into a custom sewn áo dài.

"That might fit you," she said. Anxiety building about my body and my unspooling connection to my heritage, I put off dress-shopping for months, until I could no longer stomach everyone asking, "Did you find your dress yet?" followed by an uncomfortable smile or "uh oh" when I responded that I had not even started looking.

So I Yelp!ed, and I drove us down the Little Saigon streets where my mother used to drive me.

A handful of seamstresses greeted my mom and me with a confused look, as most people are when they see this small beautiful woman and then me—tall and freckled and round in the mid-section. When people find out that she is my mother, they respond in shock, "That's your mom?! She's so beautiful. You must look more like your dad."

At each shop, the seamstresses echoed one another:

"Do you know your size? We don't have anything here that will fit you."

"áo dài does not come in short sleeves."

"Green and yellow are not for weddings. Only red and gold."

My eyes began to burn and well, and my body felt as if it were grotesquely engorging as it did when I suffered bouts of paranoia when smoking weed as a teenager—my nose widening until it consumed my face, jowls swallowing my already weak chin, belly fat gurgling as it stretched my skin and jellied my joints. I slouched a little more to hide my breasts, and turned my watering eyes away from the seamstress, pretending to browse through the racks of colorful silk áo dàis.

I walked out of the last shop, pausing at the curb to wipe my eyes. "I know, it's so hard," my mother said from behind me. "People always say that I am too skinny, too small."

I swallowed the words that I wanted to spit about the years of eating disorders, self-harm, anxiety, and depression that she had never noticed. "I'm done. Forget it," I said. My mom told me to stop, to wait, and said the most motherly thing I've ever heard her say: "I named you Jade because you are precious."

I wanted to hug her and reminisce about all the times we'd gone up and down Bolsa, when it was just me and her, snacking on pastel bánh bò and shopping for knock-off Hello Kitty stationary and herbal medicines ground and wrapped up in paper packages that promised our healing. But I only responded with silence.

"Let's go to another place," she urged. "This lady is a bitch anyway. Did you see her eyebrows? Like a blind dog." A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. I turned the car around and followed my mom's vague directions and hand-waving.

Tucked into the corner of a mini mall on Bolsa, Diem's shop was thick with incense smoke wafting from the altar and the loud crackle of Vietnamese radio where her husband hunched reading *Người Việt* newspaper. Diem emerged from racks of color like a drag queen taking the stage. Elbows squeezed into her skin-tight lace camisole, her manicured hands bounced and pointed and waved away my mom's concessions that I was older and bigger than most brides, yet I still needed a nice dress. "The kids born here," Diem said, flipping through the racks for sample cuts, "marry older because of education." She pulled an opened-neck, three-quarter sleeve áo dài from the rack. "I got married older only because I was busy making trouble." Her husband behind us snorted without looking up from his newspaper. Diem held the áo dài up to my body, and it dropped just above my knee. "Us American kids," I tell her in Vietnamese, "drink too much milk too." Diem looked at me in the eye and laughed. Her eyes traveled down to my breasts and said, "If I can get boobs like these, I'll drink more milk too." My mom cringed and I smiled. I liked Diem.

My mom pointed to the tiaras in the glass case and told me about how she wore one when she married my dad. I responded that I know because I had looked at those pictures hundreds of times, confused by all of it—the juxtaposition of two disparate parts of my life standing there next to each other, feigning happiness, my mother’s pregnant belly barely showing through the flowing gown. “I wanted to look like a princess. A simple princess,” she said. My mother assumed that people are always paying attention to her. I did not inherit that. My default is invisible.

Diem ushered me back to the fitting room where she simply closed the curtain around me and I struggle to remember how to put on an áo dài. As I pulled up flowing yellow pants and slipped on the long green tunic with a stream of beaded yellow flowers down the front, I noticed that none of the hems, sleeves, collar, or zippers were finished. It was a rough cut, but I’ve never been to a tailor before, so I had never felt uglier or fatter or more gullible. The fabric was shapeless around my body and I looked wide, more so because of the bright colors my grandmother requested and I, feeling foolish, took to heart.

On the other side of the curtain, the tailor told my mother in a low voice, as if I couldn’t hear, “It’s easy to make dresses for petite women like us. Skinny is easy. But your daughter is so big I have to be careful.” Echoing between her words were memories of my mother’s voice saying, “Eat all of your dinner and I will love you.”

I pulled back the curtain and Diem went to work pinning. She and my mother talked about the pictures on the wall. The dresses were scandalously slitted up the leg and plunging at the neckline. “I was looking at these photos,” my mom told Diem, “Is that you, chi?” The seamstress smiled as if she was waiting for us to notice.

“Yes, when I was fifty,” and she disappeared into the back. I watched my mom calculating years in her head. She called to Diem, “Chi ơi,” still calling her older sister, “when did you come to the States?”

"The '90s," she shouted back. "To have my kids." Holding the hem of the satin yellow pants off the cheap carpet covered in lint and loose thread, I watched what looked like jealousy cross my mother's face. Diem was younger and more confident than her, had been able to spend more of her life in Viet Nam but still have her children in the States. Diem returned with a lacy red bustier with thickly padded cups. "I made this in Saigon. I'm wearing it to a party tonight," she told my mom. "With a skirt," and she used a red fingernail to trace a hemline right beneath her buttocks.

"Wow," my mom said in her polite voice that I knew means shit-talking is coming later. "Sexy quá! You still look so young." My mom looked at me. I could see my mom was done with feigning girl talk, and the competition began.

"The áo dài I was going to wear to her wedding is too big for me," my mom boasted. "I'm twenty pounds lighter than I was when I had it made. I'm only ninety pounds now. How much do you charge to fix it for me?" They bantered back and forth, only noticing me when Diem poked my right breast. "This one more big," she said in English.

She slipped her hands inside the loose collar of the áo dài and the polished tips of her nails clicked as she fiddled with my bra. "You're not wearing it right," she said. She struggled with the hooks. "You're creating fat rolls that are going to ruin the shape I'm sewing into the back of the dress. That will make it look," she switched to English, "not good." I caught my mom's wince in the mirror. "Nhưng mà," Diem conceded. "Your shoulders are narrow. Very feminine."

"See?!" my mom exclaimed. "That's good!" Maybe if I were a different kind of animal, I would have had a better chance of being beautiful.

At the very least, someone could have mentioned that the dress looked nice. Or that I made a nice choice to honor my grandmother's wishes and my great grandmother's green-and-yellow spirit.

But I spent the whole time complimenting two old women battling each other with their memories.

The day of my wedding, my dad is the one who tears up when he sees me in my dress. As soon as the ceremony is over, my mom tells me to change.



